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with THE man who covered  
the **Electronic Games**  
business from **Day One!**

In 1981 Bill Kunkel and Arnie Katz founded *Electronic Games* magazine, the first magazine devoted entirely to the new generation of plugged-in entertainment, from video and computer games to handhelds, tabletop games, coin-ops and even state-of-the-art military and training simulators. Although the magazine lasted just a few issues past its third birthday, it is still regarded as one of the finest game magazines ever published. Now, Bill Kunkel, a.k.a. The Game Doctor, reveals the untold stories behind both the magazine and the people who brought us the 'classic' era of electronic gaming, along with other personal memoirs ranging from his early days as a comic book writer and rock guitarist to the sad saga of how his lifelong dream of becoming The Batman became the basis of a nightmarish movie/computer game tie-in experience.

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Bill Kunkel

**Game Doctor**  
Confessions of the  
Game Doctor

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## **ADVANCE PRAISE FOR CONFessions OF THE GAME DOCTOR**

"'Confessions of the Game Doctor' is a jaw-dropping collection of anecdotes that'll show you the video-game industry from a completely new angle. The quality and integrity of Bill Kunkel's pioneering work in game journalism and game design are all the more remarkable when you learn about the whirlwind of sex, drugs and public-relations hoopla that surrounded him while he produced it."

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"Forget about whatever you've heard about the videogame industry, this book lays it all out, good and bad."

-Vince Desi - Publisher, Running With Scissors

"No writer or journalist has been around longer and seen the inside of the industry more than Bill Kunkel... He INVENTED video game journalism and the reader will be intrigued and amazed at all the information and knowledge he's gained over the years and is now willing to share through the stories he tells. A must have for anyone interested in knowing the "real" roots of the video game industry!"

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"Bill 'The Game Doctor' Kunkel has always been larger-than-life, and I never stop smiling when I'm around him or reading his stuff. The Game Doctor has been a great friend, industry cohort, social host, and supporter of the video game community. He's truly passionate about sharing the joy of game playing. I'll never forget all the crazy video game and pizza nights that he (and Laurie) hosted for us as young, enthusiastic video game developers."

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"Bill Kunkel is the best journalist that the videogame industry has ever known, and 'Confessions of The Game Doctor' is written in his inimitable style: remarkably insightful, brutally honest, and frequently hilarious."

-- Zach Meston (Video Game Collector, PlayStation Extreme)



# **CONFessions OF THE GAME DOCTOR**

**BY**

**BILL KUNKEL**

**ROLENTA PRESS  
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*This book is dedicated to Arnie, Joyce, Charlene and Laurie*



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# Introducing Bill Kunkel

## By Arnie Katz

I have come to praise Bill Kunkel, not to bury him. That may come after I read this book and see if he gave me enough compliments and favorable mentions to justify his continued existence. For now the agenda is “praise.”

And Bill Kunkel is most worthy of the praise, and respect, of every video and computer gamer. He’s in the Electronic Gaming Hall of Fame for a reason.

Or rather, many reasons.

Working closely with Joyce Worley and me on the original *Electronic Games*, Bill Kunkel blazed trails that gamers still follow today. He put his stamp on the hobby in everything from the lingo to the look.

Bill Kunkel fought for the idea that gaming could interest adults at a time when the mainstream media dismissed players as glassy-eyed pubescent joystick addicts. He has always battled for information over ignorance, truth over convenience.

Wow, Bill sounded so good there that I’ve resolved to erect a statue of him in my back yard. The roving cats who come to the back door for Joyce to feed will enjoy napping on it in the warm Vegas afternoon sun and there are a number of pigeons who may have something to do with it, too. (The statue may look like a Styrofoam version of The Roaming Gnome, but we’ll know its Bill Kunkel.)

Now that I’ve convinced you, or at least myself, that Bill Kunkel’s memoirs are a “must read” for gamers of all ages, I want to fill in some of the back-story that led to the invention of the world’s first video and computer game magazine *Electronic Games* in 1981.

Bill, Joyce Worley and I knew each other for many years before Bill and I created the first video game review column, “Arcade Alley” for *Video Magazine* in 1978. We came into contact with each other through the hobby subculture known as Science Fiction Fandom.

I entered Fandom in 1963 with a fanzine called *Cursed*. Lenny Bailes (today an author of books on computer graphics and similar brainy topics) was the co-editor. Within a couple of years, this teenaged twosome actually learned to put out a creditable amateur publication and became noticed in Fandom for one called *Quip* in fall 1965.

It was about then that I became aware of a young fellow in Queens, NY, mere miles from my home in Nassau County’s New Hyde Park, who had started producing a fanzine called *Genook*. We traded fanzines with each other, but did not go beyond that to personal contact. He seemed like a nice kid, I judged from the Olympian heights of 21 birthdays, but our interests

weren't entirely in synch at that time. Believe it or not, he was the serious one, while I attempted the role of bon vivant with intermittent success.

At roughly the same time, I received a copy of *Odd*, which marked the return to Fandom of Ray "Dugie" Fisher, who had been active more than a decade earlier as a 14-year-old. He'd learned a lot during the intervening years; *Odd* looked great and presented an assortment of material with a leaning toward what we then (in 1966) called the counter-culture.

Ray and I began to correspond – you know, before email and text messaging – about fanzines, music and the other, usual topics. Soon I also found myself exchanging letters with his wife Joyce as well. I became a contributor to *Odd*, which got nominated for a Hugo and also helped Joyce and Ray win the bid to put on the 1969 World Science Fiction Convention in St. Louis.

Bill actually met Joyce before I did, although both first meetings occurred at the 1967 World SF Convention in New York. Strangely, he and I did not meet for another three-and-a-half years!

The Fanoclasts, a New York fanzine fan club of which I was then a minor member, sponsored the NyCon 3, so everyone in the group tried to help. When I returned to New York from my junior year at the University of Buffalo, I tried to assist the convention committee in whatever little ways I could.

That included arriving a little early on the first day of the convention. I thought a strong back and an extra pair of hands might help in some Convention lifting, but co-chairman Ted White, science fiction author and former editor of *Heavy Metal*, had everything under control, so I roamed the public room, hunting for familiar faces.

I ran into old friend Harlan Ellison and he suggested we visit the Art Show to see if the paintings were ready for viewing. So Harlan and I strolled over to the big room given over to the science fiction and fantasy artwork.

It wasn't close to ready, but Harlan did see something noteworthy. Although his vision is not much better than mine (and mine is ba-a-ad), he had spotted it clear across the big room. "Look at the legs on that one," Harlan exhorted.

Sure enough, there was a woman with long, honey-colored hair sitting on the floor, assembling the hangings for the show. Her miniskirt left a generous amount of leg, sheathed in elaborately embroidered stockings – I said it was 1967 – visible to our appreciative eyes.

Harlan and I are a lot of things, but I don't think "shy" appears in either of our personality profiles. We went in for a closer look and found ourselves talking to a mildly distracted Joyce. We'd written each other so many letters by that time that we went from introduction to chattering at each other like magpies. All right, I chattered like a magpie; Joyce batted her long lashes at me and looked Soulful.

Our correspondence had brought Joyce and I close as friends, but I felt something different, something electric, when I met her in person. But I was a callow youth and she was a sophisticated and mature woman. I put incipient fantasies on the back burner and continued as friend.

Unfortunately, the strain of putting on the 1969 World SF Convention proved lethal to the Fishers' shaky marriage. They separated in 1970 and Joyce decided to move to New York while Ray soon became interested in the woman who was to become his second wife within the year.

Joyce Worley arrived in New York in July, 1970. Since she stayed with mutual friends, I got to see a lot of her. We hung out together and, the next October, moved in together.

We got married in April 1971 and, naturally, wrote about it quite a bit in our fanzines. Maybe a month after the nuptials, we got a call from Bill Kunkel (whom I bet you were starting to miss in this essay).

Except that he wasn't calling me, really. He wanted the phone number for my former roommate (and founder of *Science Fiction Chronicle*) Andy Porter. The reason, no doubt important at the time, is now lost to history; neither Bill nor I can remember it. Honestly, I don't know if he ever even made that phone call.

What I do know, however, is that Bill and I fell into an interesting conversation. He had just started keeping serious company with his high school sweetheart and jumped at the invitation to attend an informal fanzine fan group Joyce and I hosted Friday nights.

They came for one of Joyce's spaghetti dinners and stayed for the party that evening. The four of us immediately clicked. We didn't yet know much about each other, but we all sensed a lot of common ground and similar attitudes toward many things.

The Kunkels became Friday night regulars and Joyce and I began spending time with them outside of the club. So it was not unusual that when they said they were going on a trip to Chicago, we decided to see them off.

Departure time approached, the four of us exchanged our "good-byes" and Joyce and I started toward our apartment in Brooklyn Heights. Except that we were so near the Times Square Nathan's and the many coin-op arcades along Broadway. Dinner at Nathan's Back Room and a trip to the arcades had become our weekly treat during the early, broke years of our marriage.

So when we left the Kunkels, we ended up in an arcade. Joyce was a deadeye on the target machines, while I claimed mastery over the baseball games, but we'd picked this particular arcade because they had the new "electronic game," *Pong*.

When we looked up from a just-completed game, imagine our surprise to see Bill and Charlene coming in the arcade's wide front door!

Startled expressions all around, followed by a rapid exchange of information. Neither couple knew the other liked games, simply because the subject hadn't yet come up in conversation.

And so the friendship that began in science fiction was sealed in gaming.

We did a unique fanzine, *Four Star Extra* in the mid-1970's. It was our writer's workshop in which we each produced one article per issue on an assigned topic. It must've worked, because all four of us have had long careers as professional writers and editors.

Bill, Joyce and I have done many projects together since then. The partnership was extremely beneficial to all of us and I don't think Bill or Joyce would disagree that most of our biggest successes came when we pooled our talents. It's entirely possible that we have not yet done our final work together.

Bill Kunkel has been my friend for 35 years and was my partner for nearly a quarter-century. Let's ditch the intro and go read what promises to be a landmark book in the history of video and computer games.

—Arnie Katz  
Las Vegas, NV  
July 21, 2005

## An Introduction

As I write this introduction in the summer of 2005, it's been almost a quarter century since I first sat down to help create a magazine that represented a new kind of subject matter for the periodical pool.

That's probably longer than many of this book's readers have been alive.

Not that there's anything wrong with getting to an interesting place early on. Except for Phil Wiswell, a second-rate imitator writing a game review column in *Video Review* that appeared quite conveniently several months after "Arcade Alley" debuted in *Video* magazine, Arnie Katz, Joyce Worley Katz and I were game journalism in those early days. We defined it, found the audience, even made up words and terms when necessary ("playfield", "screenshots", etc.) that had had no previous need to exist.

As Lewis & Clark discovered many years ago, being the first to do something carries with it a magnum of prestige that never quite goes away. Many of today's leading game creators and journalists grew up reading *Electronic Games*. How cool is that? We also had a level of credibility that many of our contemporaries (once other game magazines finally came along) did not possess, and that credibility grew, especially in the first decade, decade-and-a-half after we started "Arcade Alley."

We, after all, had been there from the beginning. We possessed the complete historical context for every new game that appeared. We could tell the readers which game category each title represented, what the standard-bearers were in that genre and how this game stood up against them.

And all we ever really wanted to do was find a job writing about something that we were passionate about. That's why I had written comics in the early-'70s and why the Katzes and the Kunkels launched both a pro wrestling magazine and New York-based radio talk show on the subject in the middle-1970s. Somewhere in there, we published a single issue of *Renegade*, a newsletter that was more or less a humble forerunner of *Entertainment Weekly*. We covered books, films, TV shows, board games, sports - but always from an extreme pop cultural perspective. We dubbed our field of interest "renegade culture," hence the title.

But it wasn't until the arrival of programmable videogames in 1977 that the vision of our future truly opened up unto us. Nobody else was even writing about these fantastic games at the time, except for the computer magazines, which apparently filled dead space with odd, paragraph-long reviews of homebrew Apple and PC games which were invariably attempts to duplicate a well-known arcade title. Think of a *Lunar Lander* clone

programmed in pigeon BASIC and you've pretty much got the picture in terms of the outer limits of the software review scene.

In fact, I have often remarked upon my disbelief that we had this field to ourselves for as long as we did. During the summer of 1981, I spent one third of my life certain that one of the thousand or so magazine publishers out there was certain to get an issue of a videogame magazine on the newsstands before we did and spent the other two-thirds working like a dog to make sure that didn't happen.

We never expected to become rich (which, while we were certainly well paid, was just as well); we just wanted to make a living doing something we loved. Arnie, Joyce, my first wife Charlene and I had already been publishing mimeographed magazines, called fanzines, for mailing lists that rarely reached 200 readers since the '60s. Arnie, meanwhile, was climbing the rungs of success as a trade magazine writer/editor. Eventually, he got Charlene a job at his office and she has been a trade magazine editor ever since, even after she got the good sense to dump me in 1979. As for Joyce, she was making good bread as an executive secretary and I was earning nickels and dimes as a freelancer.

In 1977, however, we four embarked upon an experiment that changed our lives. It was "just" another fanzine, but it was being produced under a new agenda. We called it *Four Star Extra* and each of its seven issues was dedicated to a specific theme. One issue might be all about horror films, while the next was devoted to mystery stories, followed by a look back at the world as seen through the eyes of children. These "theme" issues featured an interesting innovation, something we called "Fourplay", i.e., an editorial in which each of the four writers took turns sitting down at the typewriter (it was 1977, remember) and delivering an anecdote of some sort that was in tune with the issue's subject matter. This was followed by four separate articles, again each devoted to the issue's theme.

After seven issues of this wonderful literary experience I felt as if I'd just been through professional writers' boot camp. I had to focus on a specific subject and work on deadline. Although I had sold lots of professional material before the *Four Star Extra* experiment, that was the point at which I finally saw myself as a professional writer.

It couldn't have come at a better time, leading as it did into the dawn of electronic gaming and the eventual birth of *Electronic Games*. Young writers often bemoan their lack of opportunities. What most of them don't realize is that sometimes you're better off paying dues first, even if you don't think you need to. The right job usually comes at the right time, if you let it.

This book started its life as a series of articles I wrote for

GoodDealGames.com and the Digital Press site (under the omnibus title “The Kunkel Report”). Though some of the articles dealt with contemporary subjects, the most popular pieces seemed to be about my past adventures in electronic gameland. From my work as an expert witness on three seminal cases that helped determine current video/computer game law to my recollections of the earliest days of *Electronic Games* (both the magazine and the games), I realized that I had met some remarkable people and had enjoyed some fascinating experiences.

So, for the gamers who want to know what it was like in this delightful and slightly crazed business back before the magazines were all aimed at kids, the games all featured an hour-and-a-half of cut scenes and most of the rules hadn’t even been written yet, I have put together my favorite essays and photos into this collection under the name of my most famous pseudonym.

I hope you enjoy it. I certainly had fun living it.

—The Game Doctor  
Las Vegas, NV  
2005

## Acknowledgements

Despite the fact that I've had about six months to think about it, when it comes time to actually sit down and acknowledge all the people who should be thanked, you feel like that idiot who has just won an award of some sort and then thanks everyone but his wife. So, let's get past that particular minefield and thank Laurie for her invaluable help, love, and support. I'd also like to thank both Maurice and Jay Rosenfield; Bruce Apar; Andy Wong; Ben Harvey; Rosemary Komar; my mom, Mickey (who always believed); my dad, Henry (who eventually believed, I think); Joe Advey; Vito Aiello; Laurie's mom, Sharon; Laurie's Dad, Al (who agreed to be the front for my Grumpy Old Gamer character); Vince Desi; Bob Brown (whose cover for *Electronic Games* #1 had a lot to do with the success that followed); AJ Weberman; Ed Garea for his first edit; Dave Lustig; Les Paul Robley; Tommy Tallarico; Steve Wright; Michael Thomasson (who not only produced the cover for this book, but actually got me started on this whole trip when I foolishly promised him at a CGE that I'd be able to write up the story of my three expert witness courtroom experiences in about a week); Michael-Boy; Bret Sperry; Lou Castle; the old Westwood Gang; Seth Mendelsohn; Wetsand Animation (thanks, Brian!); Cav (who suggested this book and Rolenta to me); Amy Madwed; Lisa Honden; Joe Santulli; John Hardie; Sean Kelly; Jim Levy; Don Daglow; Scott Orr; the old Activision crew; Gerry Michaelson; Mike Katz; Barry Friedman; Ed Dille; Andy Eddy; Mike Davila; and, of course, I can hardly forget the two people with whom I lived this entire adventure, Arnie and Joyce. Special thanks to Leonard Herman for his support, his backup, his patience, and his faith.



*Bill and old friend Don Daglow catch up at CGExpo 2005. Don started out leading development on the Intellivision and went on to found Stormfront Studios and forged one of the most famous sports franchises of all time — Tony LaRussa Baseball.*

## Publisher's Note

When I purchased my first videogame console in 1978, an Atari VCS, I never realized what an impact it would have on my life. Along with *Combat* which came with the console, I also purchased *Breakout* and *Casino*. Before long the three cartridges weren't enough. I had to have more. And it wasn't long before I had all the games that were available at the time.

But even that wasn't enough for me. I thirsted for knowledge about the games that weren't released yet. Unfortunately, such information wasn't readily available. There were very few books available on the subject and very few magazines paid attention to the home videogame industry. *Space Invaders* had made the news for causing a coin shortage in Japan. And *PacMan* hadn't been released yet.

And then sometime around 1980 I discovered *Video* magazine. And in *Video* magazine there was a one-page column called "Arcade Alley", written by two guys named Frank Laney Jr and Bill Kunkel. I found a new home!

I subscribed to *Video* just for that one page of Arcade Alley each month. It was in that column that I learned about the APF Imagination Machine as well as a new company called Activision that was going to release four new games for the VCS. Frank Laney Jr (who I eventually learned was really Arnie Katz) and Bill Kunkel were my heroes. And I was jealous of them. Here were two guys who earned livings writing about videogames!

I was ecstatic when I learned that the duo were leaving *Video* to start a new magazine called *Electronic Games*. (I retained my *Video* subscription however which eventually became *Sound & Vision* magazine which I still get today). I remember buying that first issue of *Electronic Games*. I especially remember that it had a 'letter' page. It featured several letters from people in the industry congratulating Bill and Arnie on their new venture. I was jealous again. I wanted to be one of those people so badly. In my mind the magazine was almost perfect. The only two flaws I could find was that it was quarterly instead of monthly, and that it had some articles about computer games, something I had no interest in at all.

I settled. I wrote a letter to *Electronic Games* telling how I hooked my stereo system up to my console so I could play games with stereophonic sound. The second issue of *Electronic Games* came out after what seemed like an eon and this issue had a real letter page containing real letters from real fans. And wouldn't you know it, my letter led the pack. I had the first real letter to be published in a videogame magazine!

Shortly afterwards I got the idea to write *ABC To The VCS*. I eventually

received a press pass to CES and was invited to press parties. I remember attending one that CBS Electronics held at the Automat in New York, one week before the 1983 Summer CES. It was at this party that I first met Bill and Arnie. I approached them and introduced myself and they subtly blew me off. I didn't hold it against them. After all, these were important journalistic celebrities who didn't have time to associate with a nobody like myself.

I eventually had a second letter published in *Electronic Games* and wrote two articles for *Electronic Games*' second-string competitor, *Videogaming & Computer Illustrated*. By then the videogame industry was falling on hard times and the magazines were falling by the way side. I knew the industry was dead when *Electronic Games* became *Computer Entertainment*.

While the industry was in a state of flux, Bill and Arnie were there to carry us through. First there was a column in *ANALOG* magazine and this led to the first post-crash videogaming magazine, *Videogames and Computer Entertainment*. Then the team switched publishers and the new rendition of *Electronic Games* was born. While the new version didn't have the same magic as the original, it was refreshing in a nostalgic sort of way (the only magazine in my mind to capture the ambience of the original *Electronic Games* was Chris Cavanaugh's short-lived *Classic Gamer Magazine*). And when the magazine featured a full-page review of my book *Phoenix: The Fall & Rise of Home Videogames* in 1994, I felt like I hit the big time. And I felt privileged when Arnie and Laurie Yates mentioned *Phoenix* in their book, *Inside Electronic Game Design*.

At this point I need to make a confession. For some reason I had Arnie and Bill mixed up all these years. I thought Arnie was Bill and vice-versa. I wouldn't get them straightened out until I met them again (and Joyce) at the World of Atari convention in 1998. Unlike our first meeting fifteen years earlier, the group was very cordial to me and treated me like an old friend. That feeling of friendship remained each year when I saw them at Classic Gaming Expo.

In closing I would like to thank Bill Kunkel for allowing Rolenta Press to publish this book. If it wasn't for Bill and Arnie's pioneering work in videogame journalism I may never have bothered to write *ABC To The VCS* or *Phoenix* and Rolenta Press may never have been established in the first place. Now if I could just get him to resurrect *Electronic Games* yet again, all would be great in the world!

Leonard Herman  
Springfield, NJ  
July 17, 2005

# **CONFESSTIONS OF THE GAME DOCTOR**



# Electronic Games Magazine: The Origin Story!

(1978)

## I.

As the year 1978 dawned, things didn't look so good for the old Game Doctor. For one thing, I wasn't the Game Doctor yet. For another, my marriage was falling apart because nothing I did seemed to bring in a living wage or significantly contribute to the household coffers. I was just a drain, a parasite with pretensions.

Plus there were other issues and on each and every one of them, I plead guilty.

I had married a smart, beautiful woman and proceeded to completely blow it. By the time we popped the cork at midnight with Joyce and Arnie at the dawn of 1978, I wasn't completely sure what I was celebrating.

I had broken into the comic book field back in 1971 after meeting the great *Batman* writer/editor Denny O'Neil at one of Arnie and Joyce's Friday night socials. In the late-'60s, I had rediscovered the lure of Marvel Comics but jeez, Denny was an editor at DC and that wasn't exactly chopped up Charlton Comics. DC (National Periodicals) was the home of my childhood heroes, Superman and Batman, as well as decades worth of old characters who could be revived, recostumed and reinvented for a new generation (what are we on, like, the fifth Green Lantern or what?).

In any case, I brought Denny a short piece of horror fiction (Denny had just been named editor of *House of Mystery*, an anthology book full of twist ending yarns) in what I imagined to be comic book script format at one of the Katz socials. He called me back a few days later and reported: "This is the second-best first submission I've ever seen." And damned if he didn't buy it. I was 21 years old and a comic book pro!

I worked at a variety of freelance projects at DC over the years, mostly producing mediocre horror stories for Murray Boltinoff and a "Private Life of Clark Kent" backup in an issue of *Action Comics* for the great Julie Schwartz.

Although I have a tough time tracking the scenario through my mind, it seems that I left DC shortly after my arrival, probably because I wasn't ready to produce at the speed that was the ultimate value of a script writer in those days. Holding up the presses was serious money out of corporate profit. So, untried writers and artists were given what amounted to tryouts on stories called "fillers" that were isolated in terms of continuity and could

take place any time. “Filler” stories were kept on file just in case the regular team didn’t make it. I know about fillers; I wrote several of them. As stories not linked to any special time or place, they didn’t step on whatever continuity the current story line, or arc, was pursuing.

But they also did not advance it - in fact, they ignored it altogether since the filler story was produced long before the current material had ever even been conceived. Imagine you’ve got a really hot story arc going and the readers just can’t wait for the next installment. Only the artist or writer or somebody screws up and it doesn’t get done. You couldn’t stop them big old color presses in Sparta, Illinois and an issue had to appear; so, a “filler” issue was filched from the files and made to stand in for the expected story.

Writing fillers was like being a young rock band that suddenly gets the opportunity to headline a show at Madison Square Garden - only the gig is a fill-in for the Rolling Stones. So while the readers are geared for the next chapter in their favorite comic book, what they get instead is the protagonist sitting in his study, recalling his life’s adventures and saying something like: “Yes, that was some scary moment. But before I get back to my Important Adventure, I think I’ll take a few moments to reflect upon another time that wasn’t quite so interesting.” That’s what it was like writing fillers. Nobody was ever looking forward to seeing your name; they were hip enough to smell a blown deadline and some kid writer thrown into the fire. Still, I got a few nice letters, and at least one hilarious skewering in which the writer compared my work to the one page Hostess Cupcake cartoons that starred the company’s various superheroes saving the Earth for Twinkies.

Or maybe I left DC to chase the rock and roll dragon one last time and work with Arnie, Joyce and my wife, Charlene, on, of all things, a pro wrestling magazine. It was called *Main Event*; Arnie and I wrote and edited it. I took most of the pictures, ringside at places like Madison Square Garden, Nassau Coliseum and Sunnyside Gardens. Arnie and Charlene worked on the layout and typing while Joyce and I developed and cropped the black and white photos.

But rock and wrestling didn’t work out, and I found myself back at DC by the mid-’70s. This time, I got a formal introduction in the fan pages and some semi-prestigious stuff to do. DC was in the process of transforming its anemic 20-cent comics into \$1 fatties and suddenly there was a lot of work available. I was assigned the task of reviving the ’40s western superhero, Vigilante (in his secret identity, he was “The Prairie Troubadour” Greg Sanders) as part of the new, oversized *World’s Finest Comics*. By the second installment, I was given the honor of having Gray Morrow draw the strip.

Now when I say “draw,” I don’t mean he penciled it and then a gallery of

people inked, lettered and colored it. Nope. Ole Gray sent 'em in just the way you dreamed of seeing them on the printed page - in glorious color, exquisitely inked and lettered. The only problem with that, alas, was that comic book printing in that day was still shockingly primitive and Gray's finished masterpieces sent the technical artists and four-color process printers absolutely nuts.

I then got in on the start of a book-length horror title (of normal size) called *Doorway into Nightmare* in which sexy tarot-reading hostess Madame Xanadu introduced the tale, then served as a sort of *deus ex machina* when they wanted to end it. When I handed in a vampire tale with a sympathetic take on the bloodsucker (I had just read a brand new hardcover entitled *Interview with the Vampire* and the subject seemed like fun), editor Jack Harris was ecstatic and assured me that *The Blood Red Tear* had become the "sample script" he was passing out to all the book's other writers. But somebody higher up the corporate (and lower down the human) ladder stuck a stick in the spanner and arbitrarily ordered some quasi-literate fanboy to rewrite the dialogue, reducing my one time "sample script" to a story credit.

Nonetheless, the story has fond memories for me. Since it appeared in either the first or second issue, no letters had been received. So Jack asked me to write something for what would otherwise be an empty letters page. I made up a bit about discovering a strange, darkened bar on the Lower East Side of New York, full of characters who listened to music at a volume so low I could barely hear it and spoke in sibilant hisses.

That's right; I told the readers that I had discovered a real, "live" vampire bar.

This story brought, among others, a letter from a lovely New Orleans belle, followed up by a visit from the lady herself. Within the year, she was living with me in NY.

Also among the most interesting things that happened to me during my years at DC was a sneak peak at the future of film. I was hanging around one day, waiting for some editor to become available or for one of the artists to join me in the Rockefeller Center catacombs (miles of access hallways apparently used only by maintenance during off hours) to smoke a joint.

Whatever the mission, however, it was interrupted by the arrival of several individuals toting a movie projector and canisters of big movie-sized film. A screen was set up in the lounge and I was about one of half a dozen people who just happened to be there at the time (along with the management geniuses who were there to see some sort of cinematic pitch). And that's how I came to see the first trailer for *Star Wars* literally months before news of the film hit the magazines. I remember being very impressed

by the Wookiee, thinking it some manner of space werewolf.

It seems Lucas was trying to sell the comic book rights to DC. Of course the company honchos were too dumb to see gold in front of their noses and so those rights - along with what developed into a long-running, extremely lucrative franchise - walked a couple blocks away and became Marvel's.

Life at DC wasn't going so well for me, either. I didn't seem to fit into the corporate fan culture, I was having drug problems and damn it all, I was a Marvel fan. The corporate sterility of the DC offices creeped me out - it was nothing like I imagined the famous Marvel Bullpen must be like, with its comradeship and plot concepts bouncing off the walls. What I really wanted to do, I decided, was write for Stan Lee's fabled *House of Ideas*.

Knowing that Denny had friends at Marvel, I begged him to call on my behalf and, *voila*, he set up a meeting between me and Archie Goodwin, one of the greatest graphic story writer/editors of his age. Ironically, I had first gotten back into reading comics around 1967 when I happened upon an issue of *Creepy*. *Creepy* was a James Warren-published anthology of graphic horror tales in the EC Comics tradition (using many of the same artists). Of course, the censorious Comics Code Authority had long since put the Crypt Keeper back in the mausoleum, so how did Warren get away with publishing stories even more adult (if somewhat less graphic) than EC had?

Ah, Warren was a crafty devil and he knew his way around the Code, which covered comic books exclusively. So, he published *Creepy* (and later, companion publication *Eerie*) as *magazines*. The stories didn't have color (that Warren reserved for the eye-popping covers, which were extensively adorned with work by the god-like Frank Frazetta), but they featured the best pencil and ink drawing on the planet - Reed Crandall, Alex Toth, Steve Ditko, Jack Davis, Gray Morrow and Al Williamson were among the core crew - all busily illustrating masterful short stories as rendered by the golden Mr. Goodwin. Warren even brought back the great EC war comics - at least for three or four issues - with *Blazing Combat* (the final issue featuring one of the greatest Frazetta covers I have ever seen).

You can imagine, therefore, what a rush it was for me to actually meet Archie Goodwin and get to apply for a gig at Marvel at the same time. But the circumstances, as so often happens in life, proved rather embarrassing. I had headed over to Marvel, which, in those days, was just a short walk from 75 Rockefeller Plaza, home of DC (and Warner Bros. and Atlantic Records, a skating rink and that great big tree they light up every fall), about a half hour early. I made the walk carrying a box of vintage comics I was going to have to trade for rent money at the Comic Art Gallery (also a great place to sell your original comic book art once the companies decided to finally start dividing it up among the people who created it rather than pay to

have it collect mold in some warehouse). I figured I'd sell the books then head over in time to see Archie. So of course, what strolling figure should I bump into as I passed in front of Marvel on my way to the CAG?

“Bill? Bill Kunkel?”

“Oh, hi Archie. I didn’t think you’d remember me.” We had been introduced very briefly at some affair or other. I clumsily shook hands while keeping hold of the crumbling cardboard box, embarrassed, certain he knew I was selling because I was broke.

“No, Denny called me about you,” he explained. “But you’re a little early for our meeting - and you didn’t have to bring your portfolio,” he laughed, gesturing at the box of comics.

“Yeah, well, I actually came early because I have to stop off at the Comic Art Gallery.”

His eyes narrowed. “What for?”

“Oh, just selling some comics. Doubles mostly.” His eyes passed over the collection through his thick glasses, his mustache twitching uncertainly. He could see they were prime pieces.

“You have to sell ‘em?”

I shrugged.

He stood there a moment. Then, “Okay. When you’re finished, come up and see me. We’ll have work for you.”

And work he got me. Archie was an amazing guy. He predicted the current collapse of the comic book economy years before his untimely death. He used to say that war comics died because movies could do war stories better. Same for westerns, crime stories and any other realistic genre. But superheroes, he knew, would last for a long time, at least until the movies could duplicate the visual pyrotechnics of artists like Steranko, Neal Adams and Frank Miller. Well, as the film version of *Sin City* (along with the special effects that pop the eyes in the X-Men and Spider-Man films) recently proved, even superhero comics may no longer be able to compete with movie magic. Heaven alone knows what Archie would have made of the industry as it now exists. He probably wouldn’t even recognize it.

Unfortunately for me, however, Archie Goodwin moved on from Marvel soon after I arrived, probably to return to DC (writers and artists jumped from company to company so often in those days it was almost a joke). That left me to the tender mercies of Jim Shooter, the seven-foot tall boy genius who had been discovered by Julie Schwartz at DC when Jim had been a mere six-foot tall 12-year-old. Jim’s natural affinity for writing comics had him running the Marvel empire by the late-’70s after the departure of Roy Thomas.

That meant that, next to Stan, Shooter had the best office in the legendary Bullpen. Now Stan’s office was pretty nice, which was funny since

he was almost never there. Stan had movie fever - most of the writers did - but Stan was just a whore for anybody with an SGA card. Maybe that's how he was talked into all those brutally bad TV and movie deals back in the '70s - he was so desperate to become a part of that world he was willing to ride down the Walk of Fame crouched in the back of a garbage truck. Not that I spent a lot of time with Stan. As I said, he had a great office, but in all the times I was up at that place, I only remember seeing him there twice. And you could see that terrible toupee of his coming from a quarter-mile away.

Other than Stan, everybody worked in the Bullpen, a cramped collection of desks with separators thrown up in a half-hearted effort at giving the editors a little solitude. This left enough room to provide Jim Shooter with what must have been the tiniest office of any executive in history - a ridiculous little dump in which his Plastic Man-like arms and legs could barely be contained.

Facially, teenaged acne left Jim looking like a seven-foot tall version of Peter Bagge's Buddy Bradley. He was the ultimate comic nerd and only seemed comfortable with nerds around him. I wrote a sample story for him featuring the black superhero and sidekick to Captain America, The Falcon, and showed off my chops by delivering a falcon who actually talked like a black man in the '70s. When I showed it to Shooter, he seemed dumbfounded. "What do these words mean?" he demanded. "I don't understand what he's saying."

After a brief attempt at teaching Urban Dialect 101, I simply agreed to re-write it, making sure that Falcon talked like all the other "jive turkey" superheroes of the day. Shooter's comment: "I've never seen so much improvement in a story from one draft to another." He even published it as filler in *Marvel Team-Up*.

Anyway, I wrote for editor Bob Hall - who at that point was trying out comics after having written an off-Broadway hit, *The Passion of Dracula* - which meant I wasn't getting a nerd for an editor! But it was better than that - Bob was really cool, and far too talented to be editing Marvel Comics in the 1970s. He didn't even seem to mind when I nodded out during my pitch meetings (did I mention I had a bit of a substance abuse problem at the time?), as long as he liked my ideas. But I don't think Bob fit in much better than I did with the geeks and dorks who believed in feeding work exclusively to their fanboy friends and keeping "girls and outsiders" (the gifted Mary Duffy worked like a dog at Marvel for years before they ever gave her a decent shot at a scripting gig) away from Nerd Heaven. Pretty soon, therefore, Bob Hall was gone, and there were no editors left for me to pitch to - even if I *did* stay awake!

Pretty soon, I found myself writing the continuity for the British Marvel

comic books (which were black and white and published weekly, so you had to break a regular issue into four parts). Then one day I was strolling through Midtown Manhattan when I noticed the massive Gulf & Western building towering over the landscape, and remembered that somebody had told me that it was once the location of Harvey Comics.

Stuff from the Harvey Twins (Leon and Alfred) had been flooding into my brain - as both cartoons and comics - since I was sentient. Characters like Casper, Hot Stuff, Spooky and, most of all, Richie Rich were always my guilty pleasures. I mean, any kid who can have ginger ale lakes and hot fudge volcanoes was exactly the kind of pal I wanted to sponge off.

So I elevatored up to the zillionth floor of the building and hesitantly made my way into the office with the Casper the Ghost drawing on the front door. I soon discovered that the place was actually a relatively tiny shop. First there were the Harvey twins themselves, and fortunately I never saw much of them. These two lunatics hated one another with a passion and they were never known to stifle an eccentricity. These guys would, for example, go around constantly resetting the office clock to the point where nobody without a watch ever knew what time it was within a range of two hours.

They also refused on pain of death to give credits in their comics to the creators, or to return the original art to us (I was told that they preferred to give that beautiful Ernie Colon and Warren Kremer artwork to their grandchildren, so the tykes would have something to color on with their crayons). They were constantly sabotaging one another's business deals (long before Macaulay Culkin flopped in the role, Paramount was reportedly ready to do a big screen Richie Rich film starring the then-perfect Ricky Schroeder - but of course either Leon or Alfred shafted the entire deal) to the point where it was like a Fellini movie up there, without the beautiful women.

The Harveys were also the most miserly bastards in the comics business. At the time I was working there, Richie Rich was starring in something like 30 different monthly titles. Trust me when I tell you that that is unheard of in the comic book business. At his peak, Spider-Man might have been appearing in five or six books, tops. The most popular characters in comics couldn't appear in even a dozen titles without the public throwing them back up.

But Richie was magic. There was something so fundamentally on with that concept that even changing times and a changing perception of wealth couldn't put a dent in the Rich Family fortunes. Frankly, the hardest part was coming up with new titles for all the books the Harveys wanted out there. There was *Gems*, *Gold & Silver*, *Cash*, *Money* and just about any other word you could concoct that described wealth in some way.

The Harveys were just terrible employers, paying as little as a fifth as much per page as starting writers at DC and Marvel scored. They used

writers and artists who had been at the company churning out the Harvey's lifeblood for decades and talked about the "family" a lot, but though they never missed sending you a Christmas card (signed by the secretary), Leon and Alfred could give Scrooge a run for his money when it came to crimping coinage. The only way you could make a living wage at that place was to churn out stories like sausages. But I liked the people who worked there, especially artist Ernie Colon, who has since gone on to better projects, and my original mentor in comic book gag writing, the late Lenny Herman (no relationship, so far as I know, to the publisher of this book). Eventually, Marvel decided to start its own division producing Harveyesque titles (their Richie Rich-like character was called "Royal Roy") and here's a shocker - they didn't have even the slightest problem hiring away the key members of the Harvey staff.

II.

Arnie and Joyce had gotten married mere months before Charlene and I first visited them for a Friday social some time in 1970, but we did meet in time for them to attend our nuptials, which were held at the bride's family home.

We spent lots of hours in one another's company. Charlene was the only one of the four of us who drove (though Joyce later learned) so there were lots of long subway trips from our home in Kew Gardens, Queens to their place off Court Street in Brooklyn Heights. Hence, when we developed a software design house in the mid-'80s, we dubbed it Subway Software.

We took vacations together in the Poconos, staying at the most lavish luxury cabins in places like Stricklands, where our Camelot accommodations were two-story buildings featuring indoor swimming pools, saunas, cable TV, music wired in every room and, of course, a fireplace. From our adjourning cabins, we could summon a van to take us down among the hoi polloi for three meals a day, miniature golf and, of course, arcade games.

The Kunkels and the Katzes discovered our mutual love of arcade games fairly early on in our relationship. I had been personally captivated back in 1971 in front of a movie theater on Roosevelt Avenue. It was the first time I had ever seen a *Pong* machine, but within an hour I was playing every kid in the neighborhood for the price of the game.

Charlene, it turned out, was also an old time pinball fan, but though it was obvious that Arnie was a big fan of games (his collection of dice and miniature war games such as *Stalingrad* filled much of the ample bookshelf space in their apartment), the subject rarely came up. I remember a period when we played *Boggle* intensely, but I was most definitely not a game player. All my life I had avoided board games (especially the complicated

ones that Arnie so loved) and rarely played cards. I liked sports, sure, but games, for me, were something you were forced to resort to on rainy summer days.

Until I played *Pong*. I had never even cared for pinball machines, but this was different; this was truly electric! It seemed to me as if I had never played a game before, never really even understood their possibilities. *Pong* transmogrified me and soon Charlene and I were out hunting down this strange home machine we'd heard spoken about in whispers - the Magnavox Odyssey.

One day, then, we two couples were in Manhattan, about to go our separate ways. I believe Arnie and Joyce were headed home while Charlene and I were bound for a Greyhound Bus trip to Massachusetts. We bid farewell and headed off in separate directions when suddenly, on a whim, Charlene and I decided to duck down into the subway and kill a few minutes at a small arcade down there.

Ironically, at that same moment, Arnie and Joyce were seized by the exact same idea and began making their way toward the same arcade from a different direction. And nobody quite knew what to say when we all met up again in front of the early mechanical steering wheel games, claw machines and primitive, animatronic Gypsy fortune tellers. We simply understood, I suppose, that we shared yet another interest.

### III.

By the time the Atari VCS and *Odyssey*<sup>2</sup> hit the retail outlets in Christmas of 1977, we had it worked out. Arnie and Joyce would buy the Atari VCS and Charlene and I would get the O<sup>2</sup> - that way, we reasoned, we would be able to play every game that came out!

When *Air-Sea Battle* was released by Atari, however, I was instantly addicted. So desperate was I to play the game that Arnie lent me their apartment house keys so that I could subway over while they were at work and play that game for hours and hours. Then when all four of us got together, we held the weekly Championships. Having been wrestling fans, we knew there was nothing better - or cheaper - than a big deal-sounding title. He or she among us who finished first in any given game at the end of the night was declared the World Champion. The remaining three players would then scrap like junkyard dogs for the equally imaginary Intercontinental (sometimes called the U.S.) Championship.

Okay, I admit that it was ridiculous, but for the first time in my life, I understood the joy of playing a game. Several games, in fact, appeared on both the VCS and O<sup>2</sup>. I absolutely adored Magnavox' *War of Nerves*, a primitive RTS game and the still-unique play mechanic used in the O<sup>2</sup>'s *UFO*. I never much cared for Atari's *Adventure* but I couldn't get enough of

*Superman* and *Championship* (later *Pele*) Soccer on the VCS (how about that fireworks display when you scored a goal - was that awesome or what?).

Speaking of that Atari VCS soccer game (Atari acquired the Pele license after the game had initially been released as *Championship Soccer*) brings to mind one of my favorite game designer stories from the early years. I was up at Atari at some point doing God only knows what when I wound up interviewing Steve Wright, one of the most delightful, creative guys who ever worked at Atari during the VCS years.

Of course, back in those days (early '80s), there were no individual designers, artists, programmers, sound fx guys and composers. In fact, on my first visit to Activision, David Crane assured me that there would never be such a diversity of talent involved in the creation of videogames because only a lone programmer (well, maybe an assistant to handle the small stuff) could work with such small amounts of memory and keep everything balanced. I, however, had a hunch he was wrong because he didn't seem to realize that these systems would grow exponentially to the point where the creation of a single game would begin to rival the production of a motion picture.

Anyway, Steve was showing off his soccer game and I admitted to being blown away.

"I've never seen vertical scrolling on the VCS before," I observed, causing a smile to break out across Steve's face.

"Funny you should mention that," he told me. "I'd been fiddling with the vertical scrolling for quite a while before I finally nailed it. So I went to one of the programmers upstairs and told him that I was doing a vertically scrolling soccer game on the VCS. He just shook his head. 'You can't do a vertical scroll on the VCS,' he informed me. 'The machine can't execute it.'

"I just smiled and said: 'Glad we didn't discuss this last month!' And I thought to myself how happy I was that I hadn't known I was attempting the impossible or I might never have accomplished it."

I quickly discovered there were two kinds of game creators in those days - the guys who had a list of things you could do and couldn't do on the system for which you were developing and the guys who decided what they wanted to do and figured out a way to do it.

Like Steve Wright, our group decided we wanted to write about videogames and totally ignored the voices of experience who assured us that nobody wanted to read about *Pong* machines. What could you say about a bunch of bleeps and bloops and stair-step lines? Besides, there weren't enough games to write about.

The arcades, of course, were full of games, but nobody seemed to believe that coin-op gamers could or would read. Besides, *RePlay* and *Play Meter* were trade magazines already covering the arcade world in

great detail, but they were aimed at the arcade operators.

Our lucky break came with the arrival of the first games from Activision - *Boxing*, *Dragster*, *Fishing Derby* - designed to run on the VCS. Atari raised an awful howl, lying that the Activision cartridges could harm its delicate VCS, but they completely missed the point - Activision and its followers were going to make Atari bigger than ever. Then more followers would rise up like skeleton warriors cast from dragon's teeth and devour the entire industry.

But so much would happen in between.

Once Activision made it onto the scene, we knew we were set. No longer was the Atari a novelty device with a few new cartridges added to the line every year or so. Now it was a record player with its own videogame versions of Columbia, Atlantic, Capital and Reprise to churn out a steady supply of new records (or, in this case, software). Once we knew there were third-party software publishers on the way, we were ready to make our move.

[By the way, here's a riddle: Atari was a first-party publisher when it produced software for its VCS and Activision was a third-party publisher when it did the same - so what's a second-party publisher? Answer: when you make your own homebrew game for a system you're a second-party publisher. But enough meandering...]

Our first idea was to sell articles on this new videogame craze to newspapers and magazines. One of our pitches was to Bruce Apar, editor of the hot new *Video* magazine. We figured anybody interested in reading about VCRs and laser disc players would surely be fans of videogames. Bruce agreed, and we wrote several pieces on the subject for *Video* - including coverage of the New York area finals for the Atari VCS *Space Invaders* Tournament. It was at that event where we met Frank Tetro, the young game gunslinger who would write the strategy column throughout the run of the original *Electronic Games*.

I wasn't a half bad player myself, and as I wandered around the room it was pretty easy to see who'd gotten the idea and who hadn't. The basic strategy in *Space Invaders* is to eliminate entire vertical columns at either edge of the playfield as quickly as possible without letting the lower invaders on the other columns to reach the bottom of the screen. I know, in these days when strategy books involve reproducing play mechanics that involve all the simplicity of constructing a hydrogen bomb, this probably doesn't seem like much of a revelation, but remember, *Pong* and most of the other videogames that preceded *Space Invaders* didn't really have strategy. They were your basic twitch games and the only real strategy was: Avoid death.

In any case, I eventually reached one of the game stations that had been set up in the mall section of the Citicorp Building on the East Side. It was

surrounded by TV cameras and people with microphones. As I made my way through the throng, I got my first glimpse of Frankie Tetro. They were literally shining the klieg-like camera lights onto the TV screen he was playing on, making the objects almost impossible to see. But Frank was cool as a cucumber, mowing down row after row of aliens.

Frank lost the finals to current game designer and cult hero Bill Heineman, but Frank lived in New York, making him our ideal choice for our strat maven.

Bruce didn't limit us to videogames, either. At one point I pitched *Video* an article about a new cable station that was going to run nothing but sports. Sure, it wasn't much at the time - lots of volleyball and field hockey as well as reruns of old boxing matches - but I felt sure these people had a great idea. Bruce okayed the piece and I believe the result was the first coverage that ESPN received in a national magazine.

But it was the videogames that were clearly the hot ticket. So eventually, Arnie, Bruce and I powwowed over what we should try next. Arnie suggested a software review column. After all, Activision was already producing third-party software for the VCS (no one would ever produce third-party software for the O<sup>2</sup>, alas). We believed that within weeks there would be dozens of similar companies. Bruce thought that was great and like a fool he believed us. We got the okay to start a column that would be called "Arcade Alley."

Well, we jumped the gun a bit on that. Games for videogame systems in those days were specialty software of the highest order. How much could you squeeze into two stinking K? Then they doubled the available RAM, and eventually started a process whereby the 4K flip-flopped, creating, in effect, an 8K game. Surely, by then, we had reached the limits of videogame memory.

But people who could program on the VCS were not exactly strolling the streets of Silicon Valley begging for gigs. There were a few people who had reverse-engineered the system, but the games were slow in coming for a while there. Each new piece of software was like the breath of life to us, for we were now one game closer to filling the next month's column.

But something always came along. We started including computer games in the reviews and, by 1979, Mattel was heading down the track with the Intellivision. The Intellivision was a strange system and I never much cared for it. The graphics were mostly gorgeous, but virtually every game in the library was for two-players only. And the controller! It was a disc that left your thumb so sore you could have cried. Each controller also contained a numeric keyboard, over which a Mylar overlay was placed. As a result, players were constantly forced to look away from the screen and down at the controller to find the command they were seeking.

It was also Mattel that upped the ante on official licenses for games.

Sure, Atari had licensed home use of *Space Invaders* in the US, but at Mattel, if they did a baseball game, they got the Major League Baseball license. Same with the NHL, NBA, NFL and every other sport - from tennis to auto racing - the company touched. They were the first outside game company to acquire the *Dungeons & Dragons* license and used it to create not only an Intellivision game but a tabletop version as well as the inevitable hand-held edition.

When *Pac-Man* hit, we knew we were looking at a new type of entertainment - interactive games - that would be around forever. The explosion created by Namco's dot gobbler gave us the confidence to pitch a whole magazine to Jay Rosenfield. Not a regular monthly magazine, maybe, but it couldn't hurt to put together a single issue and keep it on the newsstands for a few months, could it?

We started tossing titles around. *Electronic Games* stuck for one very simple reason - we weren't interested in a magazine that just covered videogames. We saw this new type of entertainment as a hobby, a lifestyle. And we believed that people who played any type of electronic game would have a natural interest in other kinds. Whether you played video, computer, arcade, hand-held or tabletop games, we intuitively believed that our readers would want to know what was happening in the other gaming realms.

We even had ace photographer Dave Lustig go around shooting the fanciest, most opulent arcades in the country. His other regular assignment was to photograph the expensive, professional simulators; training devices which were even then being used to instruct students in everything from flying 747s to playing Casey Jones in a locomotive simulator with projection screens on the left, right, top and bottom of the unit, so the novice engineer could actually look out the window and see the gravel and rails passing beneath them, observe the hills and farms on either side of the tracks and even ogle the sky above.

The okay was given, but the first issue of *Electronic Games*, which was put together over the summer of 1981, was going to be largely my baby. Arnie was still working for big money at one of the leading publishers of consumer magazines and he couldn't afford to walk out on that kind of money without some assurance that *Electronic Games* was going to be more than a one shot wonder.

So, while he was able to write (under a pseudonym) and help plan every detail of the magazine, I spent the next few months on my own up at Reese's funky office, learning how publishing worked, writing and rewriting while trying to deal with an art director who could give a coma patient high blood pressure.

I had lost my wife, had no steady source of income and was about to embark on an experiment that seemed like such a no-brainer to me that

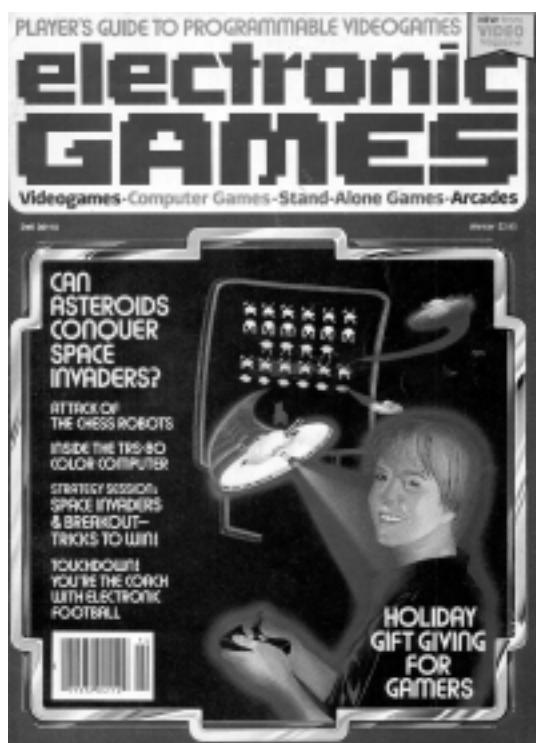
*Bill Kunkel*

every day I walked down to the corner newsstand with the shakes, expecting to see that some other publisher had beaten us to the punch.

But I knew at last what I was going to do with my life. I wasn't going to be a rock and roll star. I wasn't going to write comic books and I wasn't going to be a photographer (briefly, following the end of my marriage, I started photographing naked ladies based on my experience shooting wrestlers years earlier).

I was going to be a writer-editor and I was going to be a key member of the team that would introduce magazines about electronic games to the world. Before we were done, we would start a category comprising nearly a dozen magazines. *Electronic Games* was licensed to France (where it became *Tilt!*) and Germany (*Tele-Match*) and the Rosenfields were able to purchase the penthouse floor of the Grumbacher building on 34<sup>th</sup> Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue - with cash.

It was the start of one of the best times of my life.



*The classic cover of the original EG's first issue.*

*THIS is how you do a first issue cover.*

# Start Me Up

I  
(1981)

In the beginning, I wasn't the Game Doctor.

According to my earliest notes, the Q&A column was going to feature cartoons and the character in those cartoons would more or less come off as the author of the column. The character was called "Dr. Cursor" and if you have one of the first few issues of *Electronic Games* (or a copy of this book), you can actually see him/it.

The Dr. Cursor cartoons were drawn by artist Ross Chamberlain and basically showed us the eponymous character (who was, quite literally, an anthropomorphic cursor head with a stethoscope, one of those headband lights doctors used to use, and the body of a human being). The idea was that Dr. Cursor would offer some sort of useful tip (example: "Be careful when connecting or unplugging your game controllers - they'll last a lot longer!") and also serve as the visual representative for the column.

It was the summer of '81 and we were shooting to get the first - and for all we knew, the only - issue of *Electronic Games* onto newsstands before the Christmas buying season. Of course, we had no idea who would want to read such a magazine. Would it be kids, in which case the Dr. Cursor deal would be okay, or would it be their parents, looking for the lowdown on these new videogame thingies? Worse still, might it be teen gamers who would probably gag at the idea of a Q&A column being overseen by a 1980s pre-"*cursor*" to *Spongebob Squarepants*?

On the first issue, I was really flying by the seat of my pants. Arnie was



Here he is, the original incarnation of the Game Doctor. Cartoon by Ross Chamberlain

still working a full time, well-paying job as an editor and writer for *Quick Frozen Foods*, a trade magazine. There was no way he could walk out on his steady gig to help oversee the creation of what could turn out to be a one-shot publication. Joyce (Arnie's wife who wrote under her maiden name of "Worley") was making even bigger money, meanwhile, as an executive secretary.

Those were jobs you just didn't walk out on unless you were headed into a sure thing.



*While I worked at Harvey Comics, ace artist and good friend Ernie Colon drew this pencil sketch of the entire Richie Rich clan and dedicated it to my family. The inscription appears at the bottom. I've been looking for a first-rate inker to ink it and a superb colorist to finish it off, but I couldn't bear to let anyone touch those perfect pencils.*

she eventually got some sense and left me.

So for me, it was hardly an economic gamble. The problem was, I had never edited anything more ambitious than a fanzine on my own and now I was basically alone, constantly making decisions on the fly that would seriously affect the magazine's chances for success. Sure, the three of us met regularly and remained in phone contact, but a lot of it just fell on me because I was the only person there it could fall on.

I spent long, hot afternoons learning to proofread galleys, the long sheets of paper which we generated on-site. There was a typesetting and printing room which Reese seemed to staff exclusively with women from Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. Long streams of type were generated by essentially pre-digital equipment while the girls watched Spanish-language monster movies and soap operas on a tiny, black and white TV set.

I also got to do some really interesting things. Once, I hatched the idea of calling up Bally-Midway and offering them the inside back cover, a prime

I, on the other hand, had no pressing demands on my time. I was still writing the occasional *Richie Rich* story for Harvey Comics, but their pay rate was so ridiculously low that giving it up altogether for a few months would hardly constitute a financial hardship. I was already living off the charity of my ex-wife's parents, who inexplicably allowed me to stay on in the duplex apartment that their daughter and I had occupied together until

advertising position. For free. The idea was that the coin-op companies were producing ads anyway - for the trade magazines *RePlay* and *Play Meter* - but they had never had a vehicle through which they could reach the public directly. That's what I was offering them. And since I knew we had no one locked in on that page anyway, what were we going to lose by giving them a free taste?

I cleared the idea with Jay and whoever was running sales at that point and they said go ahead, give it a shot. So I called Bally-Midway and was eventually put in touch with someone in advertising. I explained who we were and what we were offering them.

“The inside back cover?” she asked incredulously. “What’s THAT gonna cost?”

“No, you see, we’re offering you the spot for free, because we know you’ve never been in a consumer magazine before and—”

“You’re talking the inside back cover?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“I’m serious. It’s free the first time. You know, like heroin. And we’re hoping you’ll like it so much, you’ll get addicted to advertising with us.”

This was the point where she both laughed slightly and seemed to finally believe me. The deal was done, and within a month or two, Bally-Midway had signed a contract, locking up the inside back cover for the next year. Eventually, the coin-op business developed to the point where we were able to hire a Mid-West Sales rep just to deal with the arcade ads.

But to return to that summer and my battle to get the first issue out the door, I wasn’t totally alone. I was both blessed and saddled with a hyper-tense, young Vietnamese art director named Andy Wong who was totally at ease with the notion of arriving at work around 10:30 A.M. and working to two or three in the morning.

Andy was one of those guys who took a while to get into a groove, but once he was there, he could settle in forever. This was a problem for me in that I tended toward a cut-and-run style; get it done as well and as quickly as possible and leave. This created some personality conflicts, but how pissed could you get at a guy who was willing to work past midnight five nights a week and then stop in the office over the weekend to obsess over some niggling detail?

The first thing I had to do - along with great inputs of insight from Arnie and Joyce - was develop a language for the things we were doing that Andy would understand as a non-gamer for whom English was a second language. Arnie and I licked a major problem by coming up with the word “playfield” to describe what the gamer saw when they played the game. That was helpful in writing reviews, but “screenshot” helped more with Andy.

Screenshots were the game screen images which the publishers provided. That early on, some of these were actual screen captures, but many were hand rendered to look as much as possible like the actual game screens. And when dealing with the then-tiny computer software companies, we sometimes had to hire artists to create faux-playfields for us. Unfortunately, the artists never quite got the idea. We had one hand drawing of a playfield from Sierra Online's *Jawbreaker* that looked quite nice but very little like the actual game.

That summer, it seemed as if I spent half my life contacting game companies in an attempt to obtain some sort of artistic representation of what their software product looked like. Eventually, the companies began doing regular screen captures on color slides. Unhappily, many of these looked worse than the hand drawn versions because photographing a curved TV screen was, at the time, among the most difficult things you could ask a photographer to do.

Of course, the problem of language was a recurring one, and not just for me and Andy but for our readers as well. Once "scrolling" came along, we went with that technical term and simply told the readers what it meant. What it meant for us, however, was that it now often became necessary to obtain an entire series of screenshots for a single game since everything in that game was no longer contained within a single playfield.

Then we worked out the term "play mechanics" to describe the game's technical interface (i.e., what you did with the joystick to play the game) because no kid knew what an "interface" was back then and, again, we had no idea what our reader demographics were going to look like. Were we writing for 12 year olds or adults? When the first reader surveys eventually arrived, it turned out our average reader was 21. Our representative audience was also 98% male.

Without question, however, our most enduring legacy in terms of coining terms belongs to Joyce, with an explanation. It all started when a letter arrived from a reader, barely able to contain his excitement at having discovered something wonderful and magical in his Atari VCS game, *Adventure*. Known to most contemporary fans as that goofy-looking topdown maze adventure with the dragons that look like ducks, it was a triumph for its time (as was the similar VCS game *Superman*). *Adventure* was the work of Warren Robinett and obviously Warren was pretty happy with what he'd done since he secreted his initials within the game, hiding it under a maze of complex coding that would require the gamer to perform a sequence of maneuvers and then move the cursor to a specific spot on the screen in order to uncover it.

Somehow, however, this kid had stumbled upon the magical sequence

and now he had to know what the letters "WR" could possibly mean. Was it a secret message intended for him alone? A warning? A bug?

We soon found out that Warren didn't really expect anybody to locate his initials and certainly didn't think he'd find it splashed all over a magazine. Early on, we were told that Atari was very unhappy about the whole business - until the company smartened up and realized it had just been handed a wonderful tool for selling videogames: hidden messages!

But what were these things going to be called?

That's when Joyce noted that the experience of encountering a hidden object or message in the course of playing a game was not unlike finding an Easter Egg. Thus they were christened and to this day any hidden game element, from Warren's initials to the now-notorious "Hot Coffee" sequence in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is known by that nomenclature.

At least that's how I've heard the story played back to me a thousand times over the years. The only problem with this beloved story is that it isn't accurate. In point of fact, the secret message (which was not merely Warren's initials but the triumphant proclamation "Created by Warren Robinett") was discovered some time before the first issue of *Electronic Games* ever hit the stands.

Let me take you back to that first issue where it was, in fact, Joyce's lead story. It appeared as follows (except this time I'm correcting a typo I missed):

Atari confirms rumor: secret messages exist!

Sources at Atari have confirmed one of arcading's most persistent wild stories. If a gamer sends the hero to a certain room in the VCS *Adventure* and performs a specific action, a secret message revealing the designer's name will appear on the screen. Many had scoffed at the notion, citing the fact that Atari doesn't credit designers, but it turns out to be true.

Although the programmer in question didn't see fit to let his employer in on the joke, Atari is evidently taking the whole thing with good grace. In fact, it gave Steve Wright an idea for the future.

"From now on," he told *Electronic Games* in an exclusive interview, "we're going to plant little 'Easter eggs' like that in the games. Eventually, we may have a real treasure hunt with the clues hidden in various game cartridges!"

How will araders know when a cartridge contains such buried treasure? By arrangement with Atari, *Electronic Games* will be able to let the gaming world know when to start hunting. We'll tell you when an "Easter egg" is buried in a new release, but not how to find it.

So there you have it. Much as I wish Joyce had indeed coined the term, she actually was the first person to publicly report it, but Steve Wright - a secret master of the VCS who you will meet again in these pages - is the man to whom history should give the true credit.

And I guess a few props should be extended in the direction of the man who truly started it all, Warren Robinett. That was some thing you created,

Warren.

Of course, once Andy Wong and I settled on what a playfield was, Andy had to have them. He had to have them all, even the ones we weren't using in that issue. I would attempt to explain that I couldn't summon these shots up by magic and all I could do was keep calling the companies. "We GOT to have them!" was Andy's mantra. "You tell them that! We GOT to have them!"

I think Andy did a fine job on the first few issues, but once it was established that *Electronic Games* was going to be an ongoing magazine and Arnie and I were sharing a tiny office, I talked to him about how difficult it was for me to work with a Type-A type like Andy. He suggested I talk to our publisher, Jay Rosenfield, and so I went to Jay and pled my case.

"Andy's driving me nuts," I explained to him with my usual gift for diplomacy. "I'm afraid I'm going to strangle him."

By now, Arnie and I were pretty much at the point where we weren't quite the "golden boys" we would soon become, but they still gave us a lot of space (personal, if not office). "What would you like to do?" Jay asked. "Ideally."

That was no struggle. Ben Harvey (AKA Harvey Hirsch and probably a half a dozen other names) was an old school art directing master. Cooler than a clutch of cucumbers with his horn rim glasses, cigarette holder, mustache and mischievous smile, he was probably the single most indispensable employee in the entire company (including the publishers), either laying out or overseeing almost every project in the house.

Just think of the range of magazines that Reese was publishing in those days. They were probably the last company on Earth still doing those sleazy detective magazines that were already becoming retro-chic in 1981. *Confidential Detective* and *Official Detective* (or "OD" as it was lovingly known) were put together by a gentleman whose name escapes me but who bore the most disturbing resemblance to Peter Lorre. Then there were a line of sports magazines edited by an old timer named Art. Oh man, what those girls in the typesetting pool could do to a list of baseball statistics.

*Beaver*, however, gets its own paragraph, at the very least. *Beaver* was a men's magazine that occupied the absolutely bottom of the porno ladder. The head photographer, a charming and gifted gentleman named Tony Curran, got many of his models straight off the bus at the Port Authority. Sometimes he got them right off the street.

Sometimes, he would bring them up to the office and let me tell you, these were some of the skankiest-looking women I saw until crack came along. But Tony was a real artist at cleaning them up, then lighting them in such a way that they almost looked like attractive women, as long as your eye didn't linger on their faces too closely.

Soon after I started at Reese, Tony got a female NYPD cop to pose

nude and in portions of her actual uniform for the magazine. When the issue hit the streets, the NYPD hit the roof. Jay, whose primary concerns in life regarded personal public humiliation and even the possibility of a lawsuit, grimaced through the entire ordeal while the papers referred to him as a pornographer. There we were on the cover of the *New York Daily News* and Jay was dying of shame.

Beaver's editor was perhaps the most interesting individual in the shop, Annie Sugar. In another life, Annie had been Andrew Sugarman, an editor of men's magazines (of the hunting and fishing variety), but following a sex change she found herself at Reese, editing the world's worst nudie publication. Nice lady; I remember her daughter would come in and help her apply make-up, since she obviously had not been a feminine man, just a regular guy in the wrong body. I always liked Annie and thought she was witty as hell. I'm sure she's still around somewhere, smoking one of those mini-cigars and calling people "Darling."

And, of course, at the top of the food chain was the new success, *Video* magazine. We were just the new kids on the block.

Ben handled the art director chores, directly or indirectly, on just about all of them, but to me, he was a legend as the man who created the classic ad for Sea Monkeys (actually brine shrimp) which appeared on the back covers of uncountable comic books for decades.

"Ideally, I'd like to work with Ben," I told Jay.

Jay thought about it a second, then called Ben, Andy and Arnie into the office. He suggested a trade-off in which Andy would take over one of Ben's books while Ben would handle the art direction on *Electronic Games*. Ben smiled, nodded and it was done.

Man, was I happy.

On *Electronic Games*, Ben had primarily served as an advisor to Andy. But now, taking it under his wing, he began calling in top illustrators, relying as little as possible on screenshots (until they started to improve a couple of issues in) and soon created a totally unique look that was designed to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. He always sought our input - he loved it, since it meant he didn't have to do it - and used our ideas faithfully, whether for a cover shoot or a piece of interior artwork.

We soon found out it was better to illustrate the content of the games than to rely exclusively on screenshots. The graphics were simply not yet at the point where they could tell a story or illustrate a point the way a painting could.

Proofreading proved a nightmare for me. Before the days of spellcheckers, the women in the typesetting pool did the best they could, but for many of them, English was a second language (albeit one they spoke as well as I). So the copy was invariably riddled with typographical errors

and eliminating them was like attempting to clear a house of roaches by stepping on them one at a time. Between the typos I missed (plenty of those) and the new typos that were introduced with each new iteration, I sometimes found myself proofing the same copy a dozen times.

And the magazine *still* emerged full of mis-spellings and grammatical infelicities. In fact, it was so bad that one day a young would-be writer fresh out of college named Tracie Forman called us and told us that she really liked the magazine, “but you really need a proofreader.”

We agreed and since female gamers were a rare commodity in those days, I invited her down to the office, where she soon found an editorial position and became one of the first female game journalists (along with Joyce and Randi Hacker). She was a very good writer and a dedicated gamer but she never did get rid of the typos.

In any case, once these columns of type were finally declared sufficiently bug-free, they were hand run through a waxing machine. This device used powerful rollers to grab the copy and send it through a process whereby an extremely thin coat of wax was layered over the paper, giving it a bright sheen and heightening the contrast between the text and the background.

One day I foolishly wore a tie to work - something I rarely did - and I quickly found out why I had intuitively known it was a bad idea. I looked away for a second while I was waxing some sheets and the machine grabbed my tie and began pulling me inexorably toward its wax-spewing guts. I felt like Phyllis Kirk being menaced by Vincent Price in *House of Wax* and repressed my panic just long enough to throw the shut-down switch.

It still took several minutes to extract my tie - now glistening and stiff as a board - from the machine’s hungry innards.

Once they were waxed, the columns were then pasted down on oversized cardboard sheets and the magazine was laid out, with spaces indicated for photos or illustrations left blank. Of course, this all sounds frighteningly primitive here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but the irony of it is that I think the original *Electronic Games* looked a hell of a lot better than its 1990s reincarnation. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

We had already come up with the regular columns which would appear in each issue. There would be “Switch On!” which was Arnie’s editorial and “Readers Replay” served as the letter column. Joyce was our news editor and wrote “Electronic Games Hotline.” At some point early on, we began to make a gaming newsletter available to the readers and Joyce wrote that as well. I believe it started out under the Hotline name but is probably better remembered as “Arcade Express.”

Other columns included “Insert Coin Here” (coin-op reviews), “Programmable Parade” (console software reviews), “Strategy Session” (Frank Tetro’s strat column), “Joystick Jury” (reader polls), “Computer

Playland" (computer software reviews), "Inside Gaming" (interviews with game creators), "Arcade America" (Dave Lustig photographed the swankiest and most popular arcades in the country) and "Stand-Alone Scene" (table top and handheld game reviews).

Although we all enjoyed a variety of games, it was thought best to compartmentalize our coverage. Arnie and I did the console reviews and early-on, Arnie (or "Frank Laney Jr." as he was known before leaving his trade magazine job) did most of the computer software reviews. I handled the coin-ops and Joyce specialized in the stand-alones and the news.

Then, of course, there was that "Q&A" business.

I eventually decided, since I wound up writing the thing, to use the Dr. Cursor cartoons but to ascribe the actual writing to an individual designated as the Game Doctor in the introductory paragraph (but no byline). As to why I didn't simply use my own name, well, that was a problem. I was already all over the magazine and we didn't want to make it embarrassingly obvious that this first issue was being written entirely by three people.

*Electronic Games'* evolution from a magazine with no schedule to a monthly happened with blinding swiftness. Our first clue that number one was selling came when we got a call from the distributors. In those days, once a magazine sold out at a newsstand, it was very rare for anybody to bother ordering more, unless it was an issue of *Playboy* featuring Jackie Kennedy doing a nude layout.

But we got word that the newsstands were calling the distributors. Apparently the magazine sold out quickly and as word spread through the nascent gaming underground, fans of games electronic began demanding copies. So, more were ordered and the first issue alone pretty much established us as more than just a one-shot.

II.  
(1992)

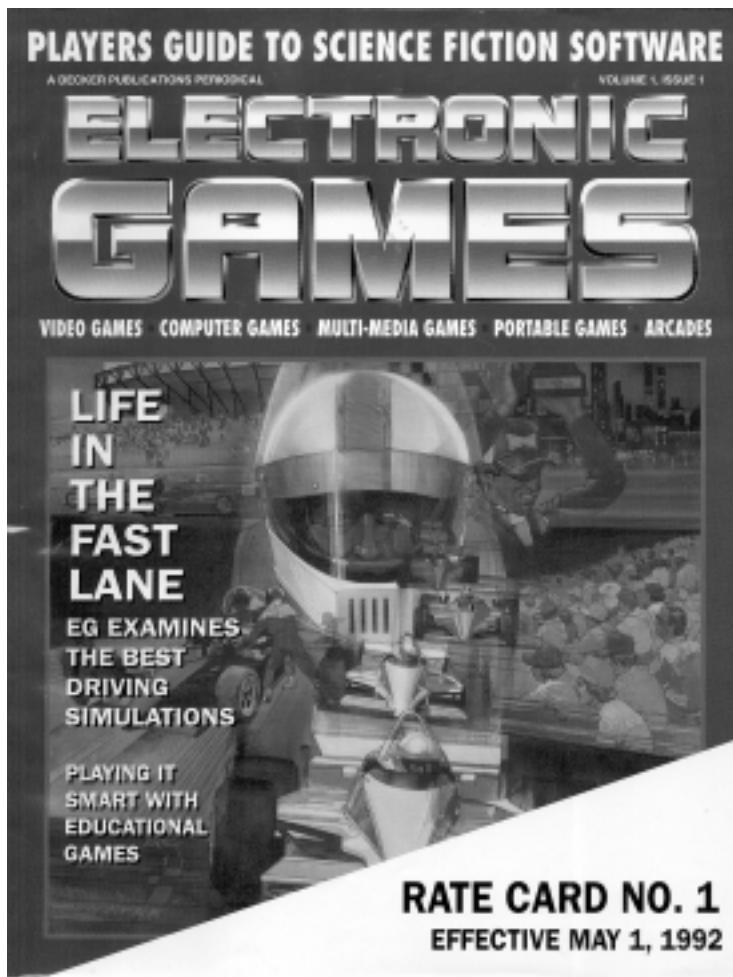
I know that most fans of game magazines feel that the '90s version of *Electronic Games* was anywhere from a step down from to a pale shadow of the original. I would contest that. I think that if you go back and re-read both sets of magazines that we were better writers, editors and reporters in the '90s than we had been in the days of the original *Electronic Games*.

Of course, what can match that first magical moment - described so well by Leonard Herman in his Foreword - when game fan met game magazine for the first time? If you started reading *Electronic Games* when you were a young gamer, it's doubtful I will ever again be able to hit that high a note for you.

It can only be the first time once.

The problem with the revival, in my none-too-humble opinion, was that Arnie, Joyce and I had no hands-on input into the content's presentation. As a result, it didn't *feel* like a KKW product. We didn't even have any say-so with regard to the covers. I don't remember ever even *seeing* a cover prior to the arrival of the actual issues, other than the occasional muddy and undecipherable thermal paper fax.

A perfect example of what I'm discussing can be made by comparing the two covers that appeared on the first issues of the respective *Electronic Games*. The image of a videogamer being bathed in a glow of electric joy via a *Space Invaders* UFO that had just emerged from his TV screen that lured readers to the first issue of *Electronic Games* in 1981 has become almost iconic. Yet how many gamers would recognize the first

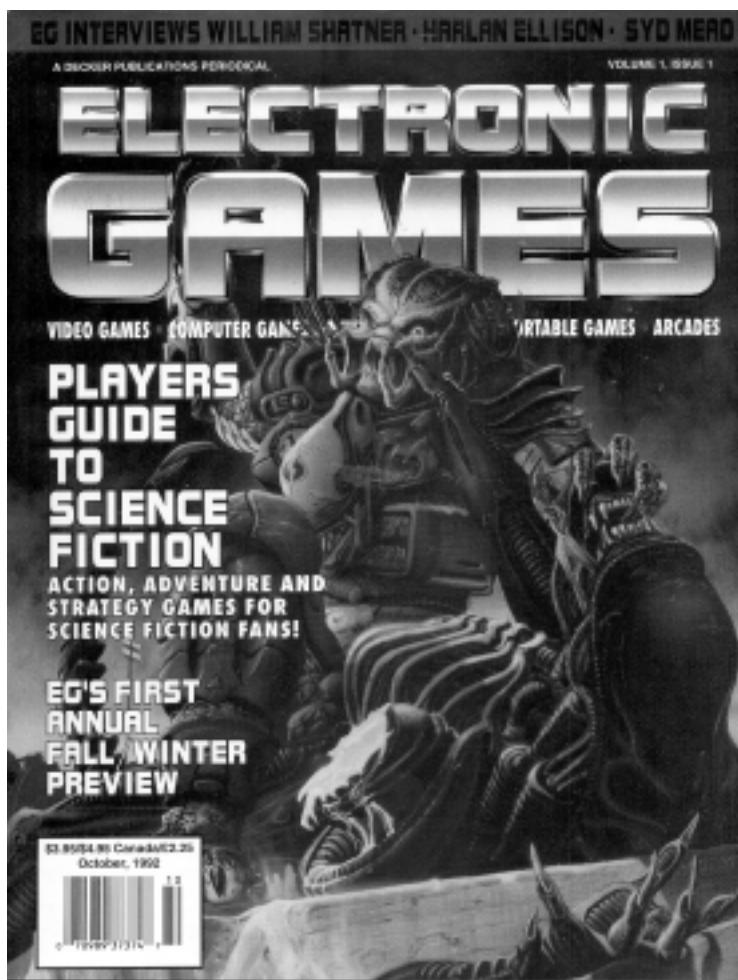


*This was the faux first issue of the revived, 90s version of EG. In actuality, it's a press kit with lots of blank pages. Still, talk about your rare collectibles...*

issue of the Sendai/Decker version, despite the fact that it's less than 15 years old?

Ironically, a mock first issue of the '90s *Electronic Games* was produced as a press kit which we brought to the CES before the magazine launched. The cover featured a cool-looking race car driver that had a nice quality to it. What I did not know, however, was that the actual first issue would have an altogether different cover - a poorly-executed *Predator* sci-fi drawing, very dark and totally forgettable.

I'm sure the race car cover was merely stock art they had laying around and the sci-fi cover was produced because the "Player's Guide to Science Fiction Games" was the cover story. But to me, it spoke volumes that they could throw together a perfectly satisfactory cover in a matter of days and then, when the time came to produce our actual premiere frontispiece,



*God how I hated this cover, for the first issue of the 90s EG. You wouldn't even know it was the first issue except for the tiny text in the upper right hand corner. And I still haven't worked out the anatomy on that Predator.*

appear to have searched through the office drawers and settled on the first piece of science-fictional looking dog meat they came across.

But while some of the later covers actually busted some new ground, the worst thing about *Electronic Games* II was invariably its interior layout, compared to which its most generic covers looked golden. It seems as if we went through more art directors on that magazine than *Command & Conquer* has generated sequels and I don't recall ever meeting or speaking to any of them. Which was probably just as well, because I'm sure Arnie was too diplomatic to pass along most of my notes following the arrival of each issue.

Now that magazines were being laid out digitally, a lot of people got into the business that had no business in the business. An art director on a magazine is NOT an artist, but these people at Sendai (the Decker name add-on was simply a business deal to distinguish *Electronic Games*' finances from *Electronic Gaming Monthly*'s) seemed to think they were. They looked upon a page or a spread not as something to be *read* but rather more like something that would some day hang in the *Louvre*. If pale blue text against terra cotta backgrounds looked good to them, they ran with it. The fact that it was rendered virtually unreadable seemed beside the point to these artistes.

I would be re-reading one of my articles and hit a favorite paragraph that had been printed in a spot where it was rendered invisible and I would go nuts. Every time a box of the new *Electronic Games* arrived, my stomach would clench in anticipation of heartbreak. The clench was seldom in vain.

In fact, the whole relationship between Las Vegas, where all the final copy was being generated, and Illinois, where it was being laid out, was quite remote. Despite the fact that the *Electronic Games* II project was jump started by an accidental meeting at CES between me and Steve Harris, president of Sendai (which was publishing that famous *Electronic Games* imitator, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*), I had almost no further personal contact with Harris beyond a brief greeting at each CES.

Once he and Arnie hooked up, they found they worked well together. Steve's dumber ideas and comments would basically roll off Arnie's back, whereas I suspect that Steve and I would not have enjoyed such a pleasant working relationship. Every once in a while, Arnie would pass along some "suggestion" Steve had made - Harris was absolutely obsessive about there being no references to the previous *Electronic Games* or, in fact, to game history itself. Steve didn't like to look back and he may have also had some legal or ego-based concerns over the idea that Arnie, Joyce and I were recreating a magazine that we had originally created for another publisher.

Nonetheless, at least two good things came out of the *Electronic Games* revival from my personal point of view. For one, our agent Barry Friedman

insisted that, as part of the contract, Sendai/Decker would formally acknowledge that the character of the Game Doctor was exclusively mine.

The other good thing that happened was the opportunity to have my own column, “The Kunkel Report.” For the first time in my career as a game journalist, I had a venue in which I could discuss the field without even a pretense of objectivity. This was pure opinion and game theory and I loved writing that column, which I consider some of my best work in the field.

A couple of years ago, Joe Santulli invited me to be a regular columnist on the *Digital Press* site following the publication of a couple of stories I had written for GoodDealGames.com. I decided to go with my old column title, “The Kunkel Report” and began summoning up memories of my past in gaming.

Those columns are really the genesis of this book (and several of the chapters in this book are, in fact, edited versions of those same pieces). So in the end, I guess it’s all worked out.



*Who's the old school guitarist in the  
grainy old picture? That's the Dok-Tah,  
my friends, circa 1969.*

# My First Trial

(1982)

*Electronic Games* magazine had several issues under its belt when Atari shook up the videogame world by actually asserting its legal ownership over the US home license for Namco's coin-chomping arcade champion, *Pac-Man*. Throwing its weight around like the proverbial 900-pound gorilla, Atari had backed down companies from Arcade Plus (whose dot-gobbler *Ghost Hunter* disappeared from retail shelves along with the company itself as founder Scott Orr later rebuilt Arcade Plus into Gamestar and went on to become one of the era's most successful sports simulation developer/publishers) to Sierra Online (publishers of John Harris' beloved *Jawbreaker*, which was a delightful, candy-coated *Pac-Man* clone for home computers).

Atari then turned its suddenly-litigious eye on hardware rival Magnavox, whose *Odyssey*<sup>2</sup> had just gotten its own maze-chase game, *K.C. Munchkin*. Flush with its victories over several smaller publishers, Atari's legal nostrils flared even further when it appeared that the O<sup>2</sup> game would actually hit the retail holiday shelves ahead of Atari's own problem-plagued *Pac-Man* for the VCS. As fans of the Atari VCS no doubt recall, Atari's version of the Namco coin-op classic looked as if it had been based on the adventures of Blinky the ghost, rather than Pac-Man the gobbler. Not only was the maze essentially unrecognizable to fans of the coin-op, but the programmer couldn't convince the VCS to display ghosts at the same time.

So, they blinked. A lot. In fact, everything blinked, creating a game that was not only aesthetically offensive, but literally hard on the eyes. Many historians tag the release of the Atari VCS *Pac-Man* as the beginning of the end of the first generation of programmable videogame systems.

Not only were all these other publishers - some of them mere kids in a garage, pounding out code and bagging their own floppy disks - beating Atari to the punch with their own maze-chase games, but they were doing a uniformly better job of it as well. Thus, the dogs of litigation were unleashed and Magnavox' entry into the maze-chase race was about to be challenged in court. The folks in the Knoxville offices of Magnavox were about to go to the mattresses.

Back in NYC, meanwhile, I was more or less living in the old offices of Reese Publishing around 14<sup>th</sup> Street where Bowery becomes Park Place South. Our magazine, *Electronic Games*, had really begun to take off, but

Arnie Katz was still working a well-paid full-time gig in trade journalism (which explains why he is identified as “Frank Laney Jr.” in the first issue or two as well as all those “Arcade Alley” columns in *Video*). It was the middle of a typically busy day when a call came in from Knoxville. It was Gerry Michaelson, a top executive and our personal connection at Magnavox.

Now I will be forthright here and admit that Arnie, Joyce Worley (Katz) and I were much closer, personally, with the execs at Magnavox than we were with Michael Moone and the other Atari suits. The *Odyssey* folks had taken great pains to establish a relationship with us whereas our personal contacts at Atari were largely limited to public relations personnel - lovely gals, all of them (PR was the woman’s ghetto in the industry at that time unless you were named Carlson or Williams). Nonetheless, both companies were great supporters of the magazine, buying ads and sending us EPROMs. EPROM (Erasable Programmable Read Only Memory) cartridges were really life and death for magazines in those days, as well as being very expensive items, but they were produced several months prior to the publication of the retail version. EPROMs allowed us to feature reviews of the latest games just as they were being released in stores - despite the fact that we had a three month lead time (the time between the writing of the piece and its appearance on a newsstand). Digital type had not yet been born and keeping pace with an industry that moved like electronic entertainment at a distance of three months was no simple matter.

But while all the big boys cooperated with us, Michaelson was the first person in the industry, along with Diane Drosnes at Activision, to truly “get” the importance of a publication such as *Electronic Games*. Look at back issues and you’ll see multi-page ad support; while Atari and Intellivision both took two-page spreads, Magnavox ran a four page insert for *Quest for the Rings*. Activision took an inside page and the back cover, which they kept for a very long time.

But despite our personal fondness for the folks in Knoxville, and while we enjoyed much of the O<sup>2</sup> software (*UFO*, *War of Nerves* and, indeed, *K.C. Munchkin* itself were among the finest games to emerge during the Golden Age of programmable videogame systems), the majority of our coverage was devoted to Atari. Not only was the VCS the dominant system of that era, but Atari’s coin-op division had also scored in the arcades with such classics as *Asteroids*, *Centipede* and *Missile Command* to its credit. And now they were moving into personal computers!

Atari also became the first of the home systems to offer its gamers licensed versions of popular coin-ops from other publishers. It was, in fact, Atari’s experience with *Space Invaders* that precipitated its litigious behavior following the acquisition of *Pac-Man* from Namco.

Taito's *Space Invaders* was a blockbuster, the first mass-market videogame success story since the arrival of *Pong* in 1971. Atari licensed the game for the home market in 1979 and launched a massive marketing campaign that included tournaments in cities across the United States, with the ultimate winner (Bill Heineman, who went on to carve out a career for himself as a first-rate game programmer/designer) determined at a national shoot-out.

But while *Space Invaders* became the killer app for the VCS and established Atari as the dominant force in the newly-emerging videogame industry, the Sunnyvale giant could not help but notice the armada of *Space Invaders* clones buzzing around the electronic gaming landscape. Virtually every console or computer system capable of playing games had its own version of the game, with the play mechanics, visual presentation and, sometimes, even the famous thumpa-thumpa audio accompaniment dutifully duplicated.

Clearly, Atari was not about to stand by and allow the same thing to happen with its *Pac-Man* license, especially given the fact that its own VCS version was not quite all that it could have been.

Anyway, when Gerry phoned me on that memorable day, he didn't ask for much. He just wondered if I'd serve as an expert witness on behalf of Magnavox in the forthcoming *Pac-Man* versus *K.C. Munchkin* courtroom slugfest. No problem, pal, I thought, I'll just alienate the top execs in our industry and make myself *persona non grata* with the number one producer of videogames in the world.

Not for nothing, but that issue was never a real consideration. I talked to the Magnavox lawyers, read the legal documents and played the *Odyssey*<sup>2</sup> game. In the process, I became convinced that Atari was attempting something that was, in my opinion, illegal and dangerous to the continued success of the entire electronic gaming industry. Remember, I used to write comic books. The story of how DC Comics (National Periodicals) took Fawcett (publishers of CC Beck's Captain Marvel comics) to court based on the notion that the latter's Captain Marvel infringed on DC's *Superman* was a piece of industry lore I knew only too well.

The success of characters such as *Batman* and, especially, *Superman*, led to an explosion of superhero comics during the '40s and '50s. Captain Marvel made his first appearance courtesy Fawcett Publishing two years after little Kal-El landed on Earth and was discovered by the Kents. And to National's eyes, the "Big Red Cheese," as the Cap was known, was a virtual knock-off of their Kryptonian crime fighter.

National's lawyers argued during a famous 1948 trial that both Superman and Captain Marvel possessed super powers, secret identities

and wore capes and tights. Meanwhile, a larger question loomed: if National won its case, wouldn't all superheroes not published by National be an infringement on its copyright?

Fortunately, the courts realized that ceding an entire category of books to one publisher was no different than restricting the publication of mystery novels to Bantam or the release of R&B music to Atlantic.

Fawcett won the case, but the court conceded that there were surely some look and feel issues. And that was all true enough. But, on the other hand, consider the differences between the two characters. Captain Marvel is a supernatural being who essentially replaces the body of a young newsboy named Billy Batson whenever Billy utters the magic word: "SHAZAM!" Billy, unlike Clark, really isn't Captain Marvel in a clever plastic disguise. The Captain, for example, is clearly an adult, an altogether different person from Batson.

Moreover, veteran writer Otto Binder and cartoonist CC Beck infused the strip with a light-hearted, comical air that the square jawed (and relentlessly square) Superman would have been unable to inhale. One of the strip's main characters, for example, was a talking tiger named Tawny, who dressed and behaved in a totally anthropomorphic manner. As for the super villains, they included a worm who happened to be a brilliant sociopath (Mr. Mind) and a bald, bespectacled gnome-like character who might have been the Mini-Me for Lex Luthor (Doctor Thaddeus Bodog Sivana).

Of course, with success came an entire population of Marvels (in addition to the Big Red Cheese, the ever-growing family included Mary Marvel, Captain Marvel Jr., Uncle Marvel and, of course, Hoppy the Marvel Bunny), many of whom won their own comic books, some of which were as straightforward as National's product.

National, in turn, refused to surrender, using the court's admission that there were some similarities between the two characters as a wedge with which to pry open the whole mess and even win themselves a new trial. In 1951, National cleaned up some lingering copyright issues that had been dogging Superman and prepared to once again make war on the Big Red Cheese. But Fawcett had had it; it couldn't afford to go up against National in court much longer and besides, the business was beginning to slacken noticeably. So, in 1953, the whole mess was settled out of court with Fawcett capitulating completely, agreeing to never again use the Marvel characters and, just for kicks, paid National almost half a million bucks.

I had, in fact, first entered the comic book business through the generosity of legendary *Batman* writer-editor, Denny O'Neil. Denny used to come to the parties Arnie and Joyce gave on Friday nights and I took full advantage of the opportunity. He briefly explained the format for writing a

script, DC-style, and I dutifully produced a short horror story which he actually bought and ran in *House of Mystery*. In any case, Denny had grown up reading Captain Marvel comics and would speak extensively on the subject. Then came the Friday night in the early '70s when he swore us all to secrecy and gave us the news - DC, that's right, DC was going to bring back Captain Marvel and company, with Denny being given the opportunity to work with CC Beck himself. This was, I gather, a mixed blessing at best.

The bottom line, however, remained the same: Marvel Comics wound up with the name and DC wound up with the character. But however sad one regards the Captain's fate, the courts had determined that one publisher could not own an entire genre. And this Atari *Pac-Man* case had all the resonance of the National vs. Fawcett wars. Clearly, this was an issue that mattered and, thanks to support from both Arnie and *Electronic Games* publisher Jay Rosenfield, I was going to have the opportunity to get in my own licks.

While Atari could indeed claim that games such as *Ghost Hunter* and John Harris' original computer version of *Jawbreaker* intentionally duplicated the look, feel and play of *Pac-Man*, *K.C. Munchkin*'s designers (presumably Ed and Linda Averett) had clearly taken great pains not to ape the original. The differences included a greatly diminished number of pellets which actually moved around the maze, fleeing from the ravenous Munchkin. As fewer and fewer pellets remained on the screen, their speed increased until the final dot was literally racing around the playfield, leading the Munchkin on a merry chase.

This was no clone; this was simply a different game in the same game category as *Pac-Man*. And it was a category that Atari intended to own, lock, stock and pellets.

The case itself was surreal. Throughout most of the testimony, a Namco *Pac-Man* machine was happily running on attract mode, filling the otherwise somber courtroom with the sounds and music of the most famous game of its era. Flanking the bench on the other side of the courtroom stood a TV monitor on a high stand displaying the relatively silent image of the accused wannabe, the pretender to the Pac-Crown, *K.C. Munchkin*.

I remember two things about that case very clearly and neither was the verdict.

1) On my first trip to Chicago (where the trial took place for reasons still unknown to me), it was bitterly cold and windy, even by Chicago standards. As my taxi moved through the Loop and toward Lake Michigan, I noticed that a building right off the Lakefront had what appeared to be gunwales affixed to the sides of its brick structure, approximately three-and-a-half

feet off the ground. A stout rope had been strung through the loops in each of the metal objects, as if to rope off the entire building. So I asked the cab driver what it was.

“What?” he asked. “You mean the rope?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s for when the wind off the lake *really* blows hard.”

“I don’t getcha.”

“It’s for people - something for them to hang on to!”

I rolled my eyes and dropped into the back seat thinking: “They must tell that one to every tourist they pick up at the airport.”

Just then, the driver gestured out his window. “There ya go.”

It was a woman, thin, middle-aged, her gloved hands locked in a death grip around that thick rope, her legs lifted off the ground by a great, Ice Age gust, wavering like a pennant in the horrific Chi-Town updrafts.

2) Here’s the other thing I remember. As mentioned earlier, the sounds of *Pac-Man*’s coin-op attract mode accompanied almost every moment of the trial - with one memorable exception.

In the middle of testimony, the bailiff interrupted the judge and His Honor ordered the machines to be temporarily disconnected and removed into a back room. As the lawyers, contesting parties and interested bystanders looked on and several court employees struggled to remove or, at least, silence the game systems, the double doors to the courtroom swung open and two US Marshals appeared on either side of what looked like the nastiest biker this side of a Roger Corman movie. Handcuffed and manacled, the massive, bearded figure was escorted up the aisle and stood between his videogame guardians as he faced the judge.

His Honor explained that this fellow was up for sentencing and he absolutely had to deal with it then and there. Begging our indulgence, the judge looked sternly at the prisoner and pronounced sentence.

“Five years,” was all I heard, upon which declaration the prisoner and his immediate escorts turned and shuffled back out through the doors. The Namco coin-op, TV set and *Odyssey*<sup>2</sup> were then immediately returned to their previous positions in the courtroom, plugged in and set on attract mode. Our strange little interlude with reality had ended and as the familiar *Pac-Man* music and sound effects filled the courtroom, the entire trial took on an especially surreal atmosphere – even for an event dubbed the “*Pac-Man - K.C. Munchkin Trial*.”

The upshot of that trial has always remained something of a mystery to me. Magnavox, it seemed, had won the battle but would go on to lose the war. Apparently over-confident following its initial victory, Atari was able to

get the judgment overturned on appeal as the court ruled that the oral consumption of pellets was proprietary to the Namco game. I was never involved in the case beyond the original ruling, however, and only learned of the reversal from our despondent friends at Magnavox.

*K.C. Munchkin*, for its part, disappeared from store shelves that holiday season and entered into videogame lore and the realm of Classic Gaming Expo trivia contests. How ironically similar to Captain Marvel's fate, don't you think?

Nonetheless, a wide array of maze-chase games continued to appear using a variety of visual stratagems to deflect Atari's gobbling monopoly. Atari had beaten back the *Munchkin*, but it failed in its attempt to engulf the entire maze-chase category.

As we shall see, however, this would not be the last time a publisher would attempt to lock up an entire game genre; nor the last time I would find myself entangled in the world of expert witnessing.

Bill Kunkel

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## 'TOON ACTORS STRIKE!!!

PLATINUM STUDIOS HEAD TAKEN AS HOLIDAY HOSTAGE



*I spent all of 1998 working for Platinum Studios, founded by Scott Rosenberg (Malibu Comics founder and publisher of the original "Men in Black"), but he and his lovely family still send Laurie and me their unique 4-page comicbook-style holiday greetings. Scott is a true gentlemen and one of the best people I ever worked for.*

## Fear & Loathing @ the Pick-Axe Pete Pick-Off

(1982)

Remember that episode of *The Simpsons* where Bart comes into possession of a fake ID? Add a jigger of Milhouse as witless sidekick and Martin as the sap with the money. Stir in Nelson because he'll beat you up if you don't and - *voila* - you've got your classic animated sitcom cocktail. The four youthful offenders then leverage Bart's bogus ID and Martin's moolah into a road trip-worthy rental car during a school break and lack only for a destination.

Milhouse comes across a flyer for the Knoxville World's Fair, failing to notice the publication's year (1982), and the rampaging quartet make for Tennessee and a World's Fair that had flopped two decades earlier. Great episode, with most of the jokes coming at the expense of the Fair's moldy statuary (the "Sun Sphere" hypocritically predicted a future run by solar power but looked more like a bright, orange tennis ball mounted on an oversized bowling trophy) and overall aura of despair it evoked.

The real punchline, however, is that the Knoxville World's Fair was just as shabby and third-rate back in 1982 as whatever remains of it today and I can attest to that fact as a first-person witness. I was there, you see, with Arnie Katz and Joyce Worley-Katz, on the very last day of the Fair's tortuous run through the dreary summer of '82. It had been a debacle all around, a dark cloud without even a plastic lining. The odor of failure clung to everyone from Jimmy Carter, who had promised the "honor" (and an economic shot in the arm to the devastated Knoxville economy) to Tennessee during his presidential run, to the smattering of tourists who were somehow lured to this economic horror show.

How bad was this Fair? Fairly bad. Its culinary claim to fame was intended as a new fast food fad called the Petro (a taco served in an inedible plastic casing in lieu of an actual taco shell), so that should be enough to serve as a master metaphor for the entire fiasco. But why stop there, when there's so much more to complain about? There were no exciting rides of the type that had been made popular by the earlier Seattle, New York, and Montreal Fairs. No futuristic technology, no holograms, no laser light shows, or movies projected onto a domed ceiling. Just a collection of dreary exhibits seemingly sponsored by the petro-chemical bogeymen, paying lip service to ideas like solar energy while in fact presenting it as tedious, pie-in-the-sky tech. If they had held a World's Fair in Poland during the '70s, I imagine this is what it would be like. Lots of

exhibits of farm machinery and other wonders guaranteed to dim the light in the eyes of the most inquisitive child.

Have you ever arrived at the end of a really big event that had just bombed? A wedding where the bride and best man got loaded and she gave the best man a lap dance on the dais? A ponderous Broadway musical where the juvenile lead's voice began changing during the second act? A long set of stand-up from a comic who couldn't get you to smile if he promised to stop sticking you with a white hot poker?

By the end of such events, the stink of failure mingles with other unpleasant odors - exhaustion, bitterness and desperation - to evoke an environment somewhere between ennui and explosion. When we were flown into Knoxville (Magnavox headquarters in '82), unemployment in that city was so bad that it occupied the lead position in every news show I saw from my room at the Hilton Hotel, which had been constructed exclusively for the Fair-goers who no-showed. Now, at the end of the nightmare, Hilton seemed in an absolute frenzy to obliterate every trace of the place. Everything in my room had a price tag on it. Everything. The bathroom mirrors, the bad art on the walls, the reading lamps. Nobody was stealing any towels or ashtrays from *these* rooms - they had clearly marked prices on all of them. I was afraid if I overslept, I'd awaken with an embarrassingly low price affixed to my forehead.

Then there were the employees of both the hotel and the Knoxville World's Fair itself. The Fair had not generated nearly enough jobs to staunch the city's hemorrhaging unemployment woes, and now the few gigs it had been able to provide were about to go up in smoke.

Visiting the lavish homes of Magnavox executives - who treated us like absolute royalty, by the way - was an experience which generated mixed emotions. I had been a political radical in the '60s and here I was, a guest at this or that showplace of the Establishment while the people in the surrounding neighborhoods (many of them Magnavox employees) suffered the terrors of unemployment (real and potential), minimum wages, and an economic recession stemming from Carter's constantly wavering policies - not to mention the check for a bomb of a World's Fair, a major gamble that yielded up the Sunsphere, the Petro, and lots of bad feelings.

These sociological musings were intermingled with some fear that Magnavox might actually announce layoffs while we were there and that workers might riot, in which case we were sipping cool beverages on the veranda of Ground Zero.

But no, the real bomb on that final day of the Fair (which included a gutsy visit by Carter himself) was the *Pick Axe Pete* Pick-Off, i.e., the reason Katz, Kunkel and Worley were in Knoxville to begin with. Now anyone who knows me can testify to my love of *Odyssey*<sup>2</sup> games. I think *UFO, War of*

*Nerves* and *K.C. Munchkin* stand right alongside the best stuff Atari was generating for the VCS at the time.

*Pick Axe Pete*, as best I can recall, was not quite in that lofty company. I dunno, maybe it's a forgotten classic but make sure the emphasis is on "forgotten" because I don't remember a damned thing about it except for the fact that it was all but impossible to do anything like "play-by-play" or even sensible commentary while watching it. But we had microphones in our hands, so we were obviously supposed to say something. These were the best *Pick Axers* in the country, but making this lifeless contest seem interesting while standing in the middle of an exhibit hall that was already being given the eye by the demolition crew, was far from my most gratifying gaming moment.

Two decades before LAN tournaments, Nickelodeon and G4 would bring competitive gaming credibility on a mass-market level, the few remaining dead-eyed World's Fair patrons wandered aimlessly through the airplane hangar-sized building in which the Pick-Off was being staged, looking for something, anything to brighten their day. And we couldn't give it to them. Of course, part of the problem was format. Arnie and I contrived that he would serve as play-by-play man, while I would deliver color. However, a fact that is not very well known is that Arnie overcame a vast handicap to partner in the creation of electronic gaming journalism - his vision is so bad that he has been classified as "industrially blind" since a childhood accident detached a retina.

Give Arnie his props - he never let his terrible vision get the better of him. He even had the sac to take a walking tour through the Cadillac Plant at Hamtramck, Michigan while we were working with Brett Sperry and several other members of Westwood Studios to help GM create a training simulator for the programmers who fixed the welding robots. Now I don't know how many of you have been in a GM plant, but we're talking a CITY, complete with a class system (engineers, execs, line workers, etc.) as rigid as anything you'll find in the history of the British Empire.

You're also talking about something physically awesome. I was a pretty flexible fellow in those days, but even I was daunted by my walk through the vast plant. For example, you had to time your jump, videogame-style, as you passed in between gigantic auto chassis, swinging on hooks like massive sides of beef, moving relentlessly along the assembly line. Then there was the matter of getting covered in spewing masses of molten sparks when about 16 robot welders hit theirs spots on the chassis in the bay simultaneously (one of the Westwood guys actually had to beat out the flames covering Arnie's hair and coat following a particularly nasty shower). It was no picnic, I'll tell ya, but Arnie just kept going, like Mr. Magoo in Hell, and never once asked for an easier route.

Okay, back to Knoxville. You've got me and Arnie standing there, trying to follow the several games being displayed on several of what passed for big screen projector TVs 20+ years ago. Alas, the minute any light hit the screen on one of those suckers, they went white. Guess what the ceiling of this massive exhibition hall was covered with? That's right, lights. Bright, bright lights, decorating whole sections of the screen off which we were supposed to call the action with silver-white patches that completely obscured the playfields.

As for doing color, well, I kind of fell down on that job by failing to interview any of the contestants. Or maybe I did and they were just kids with nothing special to say. I only remember standing there, occasionally attempting to explain the rules of the game to the indifferent clusters of lingering Fair visitors. They would remain long enough to be polite and then move on. I got the feeling videogames weren't a big part of their world for the most part. Meanwhile Arnie carried on manfully, making the game action as dramatic as his hero, Dodger broadcaster Vin Scully, ever could have done.

That night, a barge came floating down the river that ran alongside the hotel rooms on the side of the hotel where we were staying. The barge then stopped and waited as the sun set. When darkness fell full, it launched a spectacular fireworks show. At first I'll confess I was afraid Hilton had been unable to restrain its more hawkish board members and they'd sailed a gunboat down the river to blow the building off the face of the Earth prematurely.

But no, the Fair ended with both a bang and a whimper. As I sat on the floor of the darkened hotel room, inhaling the atmosphere (among other things), I felt a genuine sadness for Knoxville and an overwhelming sense of relief to be departing come morning.

It was depressing to see the O<sup>2</sup> fail again and again during that period. Not only did the VCS clean its clock but the later Intellivision and Colecovision also easily surpassed it. In Magnavox' last attempt to save the franchise, they showed off the *Odyssey*<sup>3</sup> at a CES. It was not a state-of-the-art machine; in fact, it was basically the O<sup>2</sup> with some background graphics (something that had always been a sore point with gamers).

But it was too little, too late. That was really a shame because the *Odyssey* crew were first rate people, but they just didn't have the right stuff to whip the cooler systems. And I can't help but remember that terrible Knoxville Fair as a sad example of the entire experiment.

# Activision Gets the Fickle Finger of Katz

(1983)

As I've mentioned elsewhere, even after the original *Electronic Games* was launched, we had a period of several months before the first imitators appeared. Even so, there were so few journalists in those days that everybody was pretty friendly with one another. The guys from *Video Games*, *Joystik*, *Computer Gaming World* and some of the other publications were mostly fine folk and over the years, I worked with quite a few of them.

But there was one magazine and its staff with which we were not on a cordial basis. Reese Publishing had enjoyed a pleasant success with *Video* magazine. Then a publisher by the name of Richard Ekstract jumped on the bandwagon with a copycat pub dubbed *Video Review*. And while imitation may indeed be the sincerest form of flattery, when *Electronic Fun with Computers & Games* miraculously appeared on the newsstand approximately half a year after *Electronic Games*, it didn't go over well at Reese.

It was bad enough that he was stealing the idea for a game magazine - ideas, after all, are free - but they didn't even bother to disguise their lack of imagination by parroting our title. Well, over the years, *Electronic Fun* remained a second-class, second-rate publication. And while we actually befriended a couple of the staff members (I especially enjoyed the work of Randi Hacker, who is today an outstanding writer of children's books), fraternization was frowned on in the early days.

I don't know who hated Ekstract and his barnacle-like attachment to Reese's ideas the most, Jay Rosenfield, our publisher, or Arnie. I'm sure it was the similarity of names (I mean really, "Electronic Fun"?) and it was, in fact, that very similarity that led to Arnie rising in the middle of a CES Activision awards dinner and shooting the finger at one of the most powerful people in the business.

Now Arnie flipping the bird to a big exec at a CES dinner is a pretty good story on its own legs; but, if you know Arnie, it becomes hysterical. I mean, Arnie was absolutely the coolest cat I've ever known when it came to keeping his calm in a tense or potentially hostile situation.

Me, I was more like a gas can that had been sitting in an enclosed, airless space for several months. Even think about lighting a match and I was apt to explode. Of course, those were my younger days and I have come a long way since then in terms of both age and maturity. But I don't think I ever got into any public unpleasantness at an industry event (unless



*Kunkel (left) carouses with Activision: The Next Generation at the Pitfall Party. That's River Raid creator Carol Shaw right front.*

you count the night in California when I was flown in with a bunch of other journalists for a press event and arrived so completely smashed that I wound up departing in a limo which somehow accumulated a pair of larcenous hookers by the time I got to my hotel).

I suspect I was never quite comfortable enough in a business setting to actually initiate a major disruption. Arnie always insisted I wear a tie and jacket to CES and E<sup>3</sup>; we'd argue about it every show and eventually I'd go shopping and find something offbeat enough to satisfy me and sufficiently acceptable to placate Arnie (who always wore a suit, as per his training in trade journalism). But he was right; that was the uniform of the day at industry events, unless you were Russ Ceccola (this legendary game journalist more or less arrived at trade shows naked - not literally, perhaps, but clad in jeans and a ratty shirt, he could touch the heart of even the stingiest public relations rep - and within 15 minutes had usually stacked enough game-related t-shirts, boxer shorts, socks, jackets, etc. onto his mule-like shopping cart to clothe a small army). More importantly, with regard to my own behavior, the discomfort created by having to wear even semi-formal attire proved sufficient to restrain my occasionally intemperate temper.

But Arnie was like a rock. I swear on my mother that I have seen people unjustly insult this man to his face in the most inappropriate contexts imaginable. Invariably, my partner dwarfed whatever pea brain was verbally assaulting him, but Arnie never used his size to intimidate a tormentor.

Instead, he would say something like: “I’m very sorry that you feel that way,” in a voice literally awash in apparent sincerity. He simply would not lower himself to the level of his antagonists and I often wished that I could control my behavior half as well.

So you can imagine my surprise that night at, I believe, the Summer CES of 1983. We were at an Activision dinner, where the basic program consisted of a few words from Diane Drosnes, Activision’s first PR person, and an award which *Electronic Games* was presenting to the company for innovation and all the other things for which you laud good game companies. And Activision was a damned good game company. President Jim Levy had come from the record industry, where he had learned how to make a hardware-software business work. In those days, the analogy heard most often was “the razor and the razor blades.” The game system was the razor, which could only be sold once, while the games were the blades and would continue to do business until the customer decided to move to a non-compatible razor.

Atari, on the other hand, thought only Atari games should play on Atari machines and became quite nasty when Jim Levy’s vision was actually implemented.

So Jim hired away the creative core of Atari’s first-generation software magicians. It couldn’t have been hard; all four of the original developers were going through the “extremely disgruntled” stage of their employment with Atari at the time, and Levy was making them an offer they couldn’t refuse. Activision not only promised to give them game credit and a piece of the action, but planned to promote them as creative stars. It must have seemed like a dream come true for the quartet. And so Jim Levy brought the original four onboard and created a company that gave legendary parties, produced legendary software and turned out several of the most famous game creators in the business.

David Crane, incredibly tall with a wonderful sense of humor (he maintained that he got the idea for *Freeway* while attempting to cross Chicago’s perilous Lake Shore Drive at a Summer CES; as for his use of chickens, well, why do chickens cross the road? Points, of course!), always seemed like the group’s silent leader. Historically, he will always be remembered as the innovator of the “platform” game format. His *Pitfall!* probably inspired more games than any other title in history.

Al Miller was sharp as a Bowie knife and his innovations in game design, such as the trapezoidal “3-D” playfield in games such as *Tennis* revolutionized gaming. He was also the most personable, the most charming member of the quartet, a gift he possesses to this day.

And you couldn’t help but like Bob Whitehead. The creator of *Stampede* spoke with a persistent stammer that made him extremely bashful

- it took quite a job to get him to agree to a simple transcribed interview. But once he felt comfortable with you, he was the most down-to-earth and intelligent conversationalist you would ever wish to meet. And the longer you spoke, the more the stammer faded away.

The fourth member of the original crew was the oddball. Larry Kaplan's sole contribution to the Activision VCS canon was *Kaboom!*, an incredibly successful recasting of one of Atari's least-successful coin-ops. The coin-op was *Avalanche*. It featured columns of rocks, suspended at the top of the screen. Periodically, a rock would drop. The player, meanwhile, controlled a vertical stack of three horizontally-stacked paddles which could be moved left and right along the bottom of the playfield. If the falling rock was "caught" by one of those paddles, it was destroyed. But if a boulder got past the paddles and disappeared off the bottom of the screen, the player lost their topmost paddle. Eventually you lost all three paddles and the game was over.

The play mechanic was tolerable, but the game looked positively awful. And why were those rocks just hanging there, as if suspended by some anti-gravitational force? Kaplan's genius was to keep the basic game mechanics and toss the unappealing graphic components. Now, instead of rocks dropping from the top of the playfield, Kaplan gave us a Mad Bomber, complete with mask and prison stripes. This guy whizzed back and forth horizontally across the top of the screen, dropping lit bombs, their fuses hissing, with increasing frequency. But the



Activision's Al Miller (in ridiculous cowboy hat) and a lovely Activision PR diva surround me at Activision's "Stampede" shindig at (if memory serves) the 1982 Winter CES.



Almost a quarter century later, Al finally got that hat off and met up with me at the 2005 Classic Gamers Expo. Too bad we couldn't find the Activision PR lady for this reunion shot.

player, instead of being armed with *Pong*-style paddles had a trio of vertically stacked water buckets in which to capture the falling explosive. Bomb gets caught in bucket? A “psssst” sound effect and the fuse is extinguished. Bomb gets past bucket? A boom and the top bucket goes bye-bye.

It was brilliant, improving a game by a factor of several hundred percent merely by changing its visual object set. *Kaboom!* was a big critical and financial success for Kaplan and Activision, but Larry’s heart just wasn’t in game design. A brilliant programmer, he had only worked on three games for Atari before Activision sucked him up. Obviously, Crane, Miller, and Whitehead knew this guy was the goods. Even so, following *Kaboom!* Larry decided to leave Activision for some high tech gig. It all went down amicably, as I was told, and Larry can still boast that his sole foray into game creation was a phenomenal success.

Activision was obviously a company that was very close to our hearts at *Electronic Games*. Their arrival on the scene - and willingness to face down Atari’s legal bully boys - allowed Arnie and me to launch our “Arcade Alley” review column for *Video* magazine. Later, after the decision was made to launch *Electronic Games* as at least a one-shot magazine, I was sent to the 1981 Summer CES along with the *Video* crew. I spent the entire show either serving booth duty (i.e., chatting up nerds, collecting business cards and taking messages for people lucky enough to be elsewhere, a collection of tasks which elevate boredom to a form of intolerable torture) or seeking out potential advertisers (who would then be visited by our first sales honcho, Eric Gaer). I wanted to take the industry’s temperature, so to speak and the fact was, it was pretty tepid.

Of course, the only tool I had to help me sell this idea of a game magazine was a sheet of glossy paper featuring an early version of the first issue’s cover with some sell-sheet info on the back. It seemed incredibly puny to me, and I obviously wasn’t the only one to draw that impression.

Atari, the company I expected to be the most interested in the game magazine idea, proved not only vaguely disinterested but didn’t even seem to understand why a consumer publisher would even produce a games-based magazine. Not that they were going to miss a chance to advertise in a publication aimed directly down the throat of its prime demographic - Atari always supported us in terms of advertising, PR, screen shots, beta versions of games and anything else we wanted. They employed charming, attractive, All-American women exclusively as their PR people and these ladies would help get us anything we asked for and were, without exception, a joy to work with.

The problem was in the eyes of the Atari suits. Warner Communications had already taken over the operation and while there were some good

people in the executive suite, I could see that several of the bean counters were simply covering their hindquarters. If the magazine was a hit and Atari wasn't all over it, they'd look like world class fools. But all it took was one look in those dismissive eyes to know what they really thought of *Electronic Games*' chances: "Who the hell wants to read about videogames?"

Oh sure, they probably figured on something along the lines of *Atari Age* coming out as a marketing vehicle to help stir up the audience over new products and licenses. But a newsstand publication? I just don't think they got it at that point.

But they caught on quickly.

My CES reception at Magnavox was considerably better. As I have said before and will undoubtedly say again, the O<sup>2</sup>, despite a library containing many good and even excellent games, despite having an actual keyboard and despite ongoing (if occasionally half-assed) support from Magnavox, simply did not come across as a "cool" system. The monoplane keyboard, for example, probably scared off more gamers than it attracted; keyboards generally meant only one thing and that one thing was "educational" games (do you hear that far-off scream?). The silver color on the unit came across as a lame attempt to *look* cool, but "space age" silver was totally ten years ago in 1981. Like big fins on cars.

The executives in charge of the O<sup>2</sup> account were never going to be confused with gamers. And while the Atari suits didn't have any faith in *Electronic Games*, they at least seemed to have a more direct connection to the gamer mentality than the O<sup>2</sup> crew. Magnavox was invariably helpful, supported us with lots of advertising pages and did everything they could think of to save the system, but it just never caught fire.

One of the O<sup>2</sup>'s more ironic problems lay in its designer/programmers. I would estimate that five of every six O<sup>2</sup> games were produced by the gifted (and, Lord knows, prolific) Ed and Linda Averett. But because they were so dependable and productive, the Averetts' ideas and visual style dominated the O<sup>2</sup> catalog. As a result, the games tended to look and sound alike, at least at first exposure. And without other programmers to challenge them and discover new tricks that the system could perform, the library simply wasn't as vibrant and evolutionary as Atari's in the crucial early years for both systems. O<sup>2</sup> didn't license coin-ops, either, preferring to create its own. All these factors contributed to the crippling of the system.

But as I said, Gerry Michaelson, our direct executive connection at Magnavox, was a great guy to work with and somebody who would invariably give us whatever we asked for and then some. But again, I had the sense that while Gerry hoped like hell that *Electronic Games* would take off, he was primarily making sure that his system was in position to get the best possible coverage in its pages.

It was only at Activision that I was finally met with the kind of reaction I had hoped for throughout the trade show. “A magazine? Cool!” pretty much summed up the feedback from the programmers right on up to head man Jim Levy himself. After all, Jim knew the music business and he knew that *Rolling Stone* and *Creem* were, potentially, the best friends any record company could have. He had founded the company on the paradigm of razors and razor blades and he knew that players would flock to any magazine that could give them credible coverage of the game scene. Activision also didn’t plan on licensing any coin-op hits - it would let Atari spend those bucks. Instead, it would produce games that were closer to arcade quality than even Atari’s licensed titles.

And a magazine in which they could show off those impressive graphics would go a long way toward helping Activision achieve that goal. So as a pair of start-ups with high hopes and big ideas, it was only natural that Arnie, Joyce and I would become friendly with the Activision team from top-to-bottom.

As I recall, it was Arnie’s idea to give Activision a special award from *Electronic Games* at the CES Activision dinner party. I don’t remember what the award was for, exactly, or even what it looked like. But if I live to be so old they keep my head in a bell jar, a la *Futurama*, I will never forget what happened when Jim Levy accepted the award.

Now please indulge me, as this all happened more than two decades ago, but I believe it was *Electronic Games* publisher Jay Rosenfield who actually presented the award, while Arnie, Joyce and I sat at a front row table, finishing up our dessert. Up on the dais, Jim Levy was smiling delightedly, hugging his award and stepping up to the podium to deliver his thanks.

After the usual wah-wah, we all cranked up for the big finish. Little did we know. Jim slowly wrapped up his thank you. Oddly, I can still hear his words today: “And so, because this means so very much to all of us at Activision, I want to thank our dear friends at *Electronic* - “

There was a pause. A passing instant, but that’s all it took for a simple word exchange to occur within the weary brain of Jim Levy. - “*FUN!*” he concluded, thanking our hated enemies for the award we had just handed him.

I saw Jay go white. I saw Jim blanch, as he suddenly realized he had said the wrong thing. I saw the entire room swivel their heads in unison toward the direction of our table.

I looked to the left and there he stood in his black suit and \$100 tie. My partner had shot up out of his seat and was extending his right arm directly into the air. But he wasn’t starting a neo-Nazi rally, for as I followed his arm with my eyes I passed his impeccable cufflinks and moved directly to his

right hand, clenched in a bloodless fist with only the middle finger extended, pointing square into the face of a mortified Jim Levy.

“GAMES! *ELECTRONIC GAMES!*” Jim stammered immediately. “I said *Electronic Fun* but I’m sorry, I meant *Electronic GAMES*.”

Joyce was still attempting to get Arnie back into his seat. But there he remained, like the Statue of Liberty after getting cut off on the interstate highway, fixed in his fully erect position, finger still trembling with accusation. And suddenly he realized what he was doing. Arnie, the most in-control guy I have ever met, understood that he had lost it. The middle finger was the first to come down, followed by the arm and then Arnie himself, returning to his seat, probably embarrassed to death by the incredible scene that had just transpired.

“And once again,” a penitent Jim Levy repeated, “I want to thank *Electronic GAMES* for this award.”

Hey, maybe Arnie overreacted on that long-ago night, but you can certainly understand how we all felt at that moment. He was just the one who delivered the bird.

Besides, nobody ever got our name wrong again.

## Sex, Drugs and Coin-Ops

### (Sex)

I was in my early 30s, divorced, and a small-time star at a publishing company that made enough money off *Electronic Games* to move from a cramped old loft down around Union Square to the penthouse floor of a famous Midtown Manhattan Office building on 34<sup>th</sup> Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

I was making good money, eating at nice places, wearing decent clothes, and working at a company that had beautiful, smart, and sexy women everywhere you looked. Arnie was married, as were virtually all the other eligible editors. So, sooner or later, I got to date quite a few of those ladies and even established a couple of long-term relationships. But there were times when my hormones were clearly out of control.

Like the time I fell in love with Barbie.

And no, it wasn't a Barbie *doll*, it...was...Barbie! Well, she claimed she was an actress hired to play the part at the CES and E<sup>3</sup> shows by Hi-Tech Expressions, but I didn't spend all that time as an adolescent pervert messing with my three sisters' Barbie doll collections without coming to know the real woman who dwelled behind that plastic face and the obviously hinged arm and leg joints. There was more to Barbie than that, something that touched a nerve in every boy who ever destroyed or otherwise messed with Mattel's plastic sculpture of hot womanhood.

As for *my* Barbie, she may have said she was a model, married, a wannabe actress just earning some chump change at a convention, but she couldn't fool me.

*She was Barbie.*

And while it would not be seemly for me to go into the tangled mélange of fantasy, fever dreams, kinky sex, and other notions and brain pictures such a relationship suggested to my already-damaged mind, let me assure you all that there's a *reason* Barbie has lasted all this time.

*She's got class.*

The Barbie iconic über-presence is so powerful that it can literally be passed along, like especially fine genes. And if Santa gets to have helpers, so does Barbie. Which I guess makes that period when I really got to know the person behind the torpedo boobies and eternal smile my very own *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*.

God knows I was never a Casanova, but I liked girls and then women and, for the first time in my life, I was suddenly dating and sleeping with them in numbers that would have blown me away when I was 16.

Alas, one of my less sterling moments in this regard occurred at the office warming party for the new penthouse suites and the birth of Reese Communications over the dead body of Reese Publishing. We had moved on up, and now it was time to celebrate!

Everybody who was cool and hip to the game scene was at this bash, with couples and small groups moving out onto the gorgeous patio that surrounded the top floor on three sides. Even Don Bluth showed up with an early version of his hot, new coin-op *Dragon's Lair* to amaze and amuse the partygoers.

Across the street from the offices and patio on the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue side, the ground had already been cleared for the construction of what would eventually become the Jacob Javits Convention Center, leaving, for the time being, a stunning view of the river and the lights beyond. I remember standing out there a very long time, inhaling a Sherman cigarette, and peering down on the elaborate gardens that had been meticulously constructed on the rooftops of the high-priced apartments beneath me. Then I decided it was time to head back inside and circulate.

This was when my Bad Thing happened.

On my way back inside from the patio, who should I happen to bump into, but a beautiful girl I'd never met before! To this day, I have no idea who she was, what company she worked for, or even why she was there, but then we didn't spend much time talking. Instead, we found our way into the only darkened, appropriately forbidding sanctuary available - publisher Jay Rosenfield's office. We shared a joint, a couple of lines and then one another. It was that desperate kind of sex that's usually described in novels as "furtive."

Soon, we were so caught up in our good time (and so otherwise impaired, judgment-wise) that we found ourselves mostly naked, staring in disbelief at the office windows, which extended over both the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 34<sup>th</sup> Street sides of the building. Now there wasn't much light in that office, but the moon was unfortunately shining brightly, lighting our hide-away sufficiently to draw a crowd of approximately a dozen or so voyeurs to the patio outside the office where we were rapidly descending into Panic Mode.

How does one simultaneously locate their clothes, put them on, help a lady get dressed *and* pick up all the various illegal substances we had scattered on the floor? I don't know for sure, I only recall that I did it, and that as we escaped the office, the crowd outside the window had easily tripled.

I kept getting the funniest looks from people the rest of the night, but when I later confessed the incident to Jay, he laughed 'til tears ran down his face. Hell of a guy.

Now remember, this was before the days when the concept of being

declared HIV positive or becoming a victim of full-blown AIDS was like something from an especially daring science fiction novel. Beautiful “escorts” would routinely arrive at my room on road trips to the Silicon Valley - college girls picking up some extra money - and if you appeared to be a straight businessman, they wouldn’t even ask you to put on a condom!

Fortunately, I’m now a faithful, married man, too smart, and indifferent to create the endless entanglements a sexual liaison, no matter how brief, can create.

As for the move to the new building, I have often thought back fondly to the days when we were just getting started. Back when Arnie and I shared an office too small for either of us. And then I think about the penthouse experience, complete with plant specialists who arrived regularly to check out the mental and physical status of the office flora. It was a place where I had my own spacious office, right off that incredible patio. That amazing elevator trip to the top floor, to that place where, like James Cagney in *White Heat*, I could declare: “Made it, ma! Top of the world!”

But life, it turns out, is a process of scrambling up and down an entire series of mountains, and the fun is mostly in the climbing. Which is my clumsy way of admitting that the days I remember best remain back in that funky office space just a block or so from the Bowery.

#### (Drugs)

The '80s was the decade of pot, pills, and cocaine. The heroin blitz that struck New York in the '70s had been either detoxed or sent to methadone maintenance, where the government could check your urine, make sure you were employed, and keep ex-junkies out of trouble.

Besides, all the rockers and movie superstars were now wearing gold plated coke spoons around their necks instead of stashing Sucrets tins full of hypodermic needles in their pockets. Believe it or not, it was almost respectable to do lines of coke in public, at least at certain functions in certain locales. I can’t remember a square inch of the massive Studio 54, including the dance floor, which had not been the scene of open drug use, some of it by yours truly (but only on the really upper levels).

Once *Electronic Games* hit the big time and Reese Publishing moved to the Penthouse Floor at the Grumbacher Building and became Reese Communications, the staff was all making money and Arnie, Joyce, and I were at the top of the editorial food chain. Throughout the course of a typical day, at least half the women in the office as well as several of the men would peer into my office, put their index finger to a nostril and inhale.

This was the universal signal for “Wanna snort some coke?” or the more common “Can I snort some of *your* coke?”

I had several connections throughout the city, several of whom we were

also doing business with, so before too long between the social snorting and the solo snorting (a quick trip to the men's room from which you returned sniffling and hacking as the crystalline substance began to break up and drip down your nasal passages, filling your mouth with a vile liquid) the day was eventually reduced to a series of snorts, followed by bursts of work. It's pretty presumptuous to claim that one's work was never affected by the use of mind altering substances. I'm sure I missed things I shouldn't have and, perhaps, became overly fascinated with game elements that were perhaps not all that worthy. But remember, we never tested games in the office. We had no game machines there (we didn't even have computers through the first run of *Electronic Games* in the '80s - just an electric typewriter, a phone and a Rolodex; the tools of the trade. Most of the day, we were either writing, going through the latest press releases, or collecting information on an upcoming story over the phone.

Ultimately, of course, my drug use may have been solely responsible for the great crash of '84. But you learn to live with that kind of thing.

Now I have attempted to be honest to a fault in the telling of this story, but it is not my intention to cause grief for any other person. Nonetheless, I swear upon my mother that perhaps the only two people I knew in that era who had no use for Peruvian Marching Powder were Arnie and Joyce. They would smoke their weed in the old days, but I never saw them try the white stuff or, for that matter, any other drug. Arnie always held to the wisdom that he'd probably like other drugs too much, so to avoid the whole problem, he just said no. I'm sure Nancy Reagan is gratified that at least two people actually said it.

Joyce, to this day, doesn't like to ask doctors for pain killers, even when she's in terrible pain. Oh, maybe Arnie would down a scotch and soda once or twice a year (to absolutely no discernable effect) but he and Joyce saved themselves a lot of money, trouble, and screwed up sinus cavities by avoiding the drug the old school types called "Lady."

I know this will sound ludicrous, but I was never that big of a fan of the drug, myself. I basically considered it methamphetamine (speed) with a good PR agent. But there was no doubting that most of the females I knew were drawn to it like kitties to catnip. So I learned to like it.

The event which ultimately (I did say "ultimately") led to my abandonment of coke, however, happened soon after Jim Bender moved his family out to California. Jim came to *Electronic Games* from *Billboard* and he was such a breath of fresh air that Arnie, Jay, and I finally knew we had found the guy to oversee the sale of ad space in our magazine.

Pretty soon, Jim and I were taking regular trips to the West Coast where we would meet with as many game companies as possible. I handled the editorial agenda and Jim pitched the ads. We were a hell of a team. Our

road trips were a combination of dog-and-pony shows and sensory excesses worthy of Hunter Thompson and Oscar Acosta.

We gathered information and pitched the magazine by day, fueled by regular pit stops for a couple of “bumps” of cocaine. And at night we went nuts, smoking pot, snorting coke, and having hookers sent to our hotel rooms on a room service basis.

Now I certainly don’t want to give the impression that I was some sort of drug virgin before the days of *Electronic Games*. I was born in 1950, turned 18 (the then-legal drinking age in New York) in 1968 and played in various rock bands for over a decade. If there’s a drug I didn’t try back in the late-’60s, it’s only because no one offered it to me. Booze, pot, acid, mescaline, mushrooms, angel dust, PCP, coke, uppers, downers, and heroin, I did ‘em all.

It was a different world, a different time. Legendary swinger hangout Plato’s Retreat was located directly across the street from the Reese Communications penthouse and top quality street hookers stationed themselves with dedicated regularity at the Manhattan entrance to the Holland Tunnel, also within a block of the Grumbacher Building.

But oddly enough, Jim fell apart after leaving New York and heading West. He convinced Jay that we needed a full-time sales rep in the Midwest and, especially, on the West Coast. The West Coast was clearly the money territory, with so many game and computer companies housed there, and it did make sense for the magazine’s National Director of Sales to be located there.

Jim even sold Jay on a deal where Reese substantially paid to move him and his family out to the nice house they’d found in Agoura, California, just down the road from the set of the old TV series, *M\*A\*S\*H*.

After all, Jim reasoned, he could set up the entire West Coast Office in that house.

And that’s what happened, but on my first visit out there, for a wild office warming gala, it was obvious something new had come into Jim’s life. He had learned how to make freebase. Freebasing (or just “basing”) is a technique where a few foul-smelling chemicals and a large bowl transform a quantity of regular cocaine into tiny crystals which can then be smoked. Sound familiar?

That’s right; it was crack for rich people.

But who knew that then, when nobody had ever heard of crack? The party was a smash, with famous rock and rollers, game publishers, everybody who heard about it and was at all hip to electronic games was there, snorting coke in corners and trying out the Arcadia SuperCharger that its developers at Starpath had brought over. Every TV - plus several rented sets - was plugged into a game system and the cognoscenti got

high and played games.

Later, after the business folks had departed, the rest of us crowded into a gigantic circle as Jim prepared the first batch of base. And then the second. And so on, and so on, until a nervous buzz filled the room that was almost excruciating. I suddenly realized that I was sitting in a room with some of the most interesting people I had ever met, and yet the only thing any of them could seem to say (after consuming a voluminous amount of burning freebase) was: "Damn! I didn't get a good hit!"

And all they were thinking about was whether there would be any base left by the time the pipe next reached them.

I actually passed the pipe along several times without partaking; maybe for the first time in my life. I just sat there, humming faster than a body should - hell, humming faster than a hummingbird should - and time transpired while my mind bounced around like a pinball, striking bumpers, rollovers and invariably dropping out of play dead between the two bottom flippers. Game over. I thought I'd go to bed.

Jim's first wife showed me to my room and made sure I was comfortable, a feat not possible without access to at least 100mg of valium. She closed the door and the room fell into darkness, except for the most remarkable shadow I have ever seen. Cast by a streetlight, a gnarled and sickeningly familiar form seemed to slither across the wall, no doubt the result of the freebase, I assumed. Eventually, I roused the courage or the curiosity to actually rise and walk to the window so that I might see the thing that was casting such an amazing umbra upon the wall.

I crept to the window and ever so slowly drew my face to the glass. I couldn't make things out at first, but then the various disparate elements coalesced into a single form, one I had indeed seen before: it was the terrible tree from the movie *Poltergeist*!

I fell back upon the bed, whimpering. Until sunrise, I did not leave it, except once when the call of nature got so overwhelming it absolutely would not have cared if Jason, Dracula and The Thing were standing out there.

Even in the grip of terror, when you gotta go, you gotta go.

The following morning, I rose unsteadily as the dawn broke and made my way downstairs, unwilling to even look outside and see that awful tree still there. I said my hellos to Mrs. Bender and the kids and sat down to nibble at some cereal.

Eventually, I gathered the courage to broach the subject.

"Some tree you got out there," I tossed off casually, half expecting them to tell me the tree outside had died—a *year ago last night!* But no, they just smiled.

"Sure is," she agreed.

"Some of the kids are scared of it," one of the boys volunteered.

"That's hardly a surprise," I laughed, relieved that I hadn't experienced a hallucination the previous night. "It looks just like the *Poltergeist* tree!"

They all looked at me oddly. Then I heard Jim entering from another direction.

"Didn't I tell you?" he wondered.

"Tell me what, Jim."

"They're right. That opening scene of *Poltergeist* where the family is driving down the block? That's this block. They shot it right on our driveway. And that's the tree."

Unfortunately, Jim's growing fondness for freebase was starting to burn him out. I remember Jay, Arnie, and I sitting in a meeting, trying to decide whether it was time to let Jim go. Arnie, as always, was soft-hearted, suggesting that we give him another chance.

I could see Jay was waffling; he could have easily gone either way as he turned to look at me and hear what I had to say. I'm sure he put special weight on my analysis as I was Jim's closest friend in the office from the old days.

And suddenly I heard myself cutting Jim Bender's legs out from under him. "I don't know if we can afford to wait. I'm not sure. I don't know what damage may have already been done."

Jay nodded. "Then that settles it. We have to let Jim go."

I had just betrayed one of my best friends because he used drugs. I felt like the biggest hypocrite in the world. Fortunately, Jim straightened out and we even wound up working together again on a short-lived magazine called *PC Ace* during my years with FOG Studios.

Unfortunately, that venture ended badly as well, personally and financially. Soon thereafter, I got a phone call telling me Jim Bender had died. He had been my age, but somehow it didn't surprise me. Jim always seemed like the soul of a thrill-seeking maniac in the body of a totally mellow square. I guess he just burned out.



*The first of only two issues of PC Ace from Fog Studios. We designed it for fans of simulations, wargames and sci-fi but the publisher's money problems sunk the project before it really became airborne.*

If I wronged him, and I probably did, I'm sorry.

I certainly wouldn't want you to get the picture of the drug scene at Reese Communications as being an entirely sordid affair, because it wasn't. There were still quite a few pot smokers working there, including some folks in amazingly "high" positions. Fortunately, we had been turned on to a famous underground individual who actually ran a marijuana-only delivery service. Oh, sure, he might have kif (the compressed pollen from the indica and/or sativa plants), or hash, maybe marijuana cookies and once, marijuana wine. But he would not sell anything harder than cannabis and his operation ran with methodical precision.

He delivered to Manhattan on Fridays, which was ideal for us since everyone would have just cashed their paycheck on that day. Around 10 A.M. I would start taking orders, after which I would call The Man. It often took several attempts, but he was always there. We'd exchange small talk, he'd let me know if there were any special items (cookies, Nepalese hash, pot wine) on the menu and I would place the order.

Around 3P.M. that afternoon, an innocuous-looking individual (I believe he hired mostly NYC Public School teachers who always needed the extra money) would arrive at our office bearing an attaché case. Pam, our charismatic young receptionist, would swivel on her seat and stare directly into my office. "I believe there's someone here to see you, 'Mr.' Kunkel," she would coo delightedly, knowing full well what was going on.

The transaction was conducted like a stock transfer. The Man even thought to attach receipts to the Manila envelopes that held the various products. The invoice would be attributed to: "Research Materials."

I never had the nerve to turn one in to the IRS.

Now before I depart this section, there is yet another drug I should discuss, as it played an interesting role in my career as a game journalist - nicotine. I smoked cigarettes and cigars on and off since I was 17, but it was more off than on. Every once in a while I'd get a yen for a Dunhill or a Nat Sherman, generally while staying at a hotel whose smoke shop specialized in imported, high-quality (read: expensive) cigarettes. The availability met the yen and the next thing you knew I was smoking half a dozen of the things a day.

I was lucky, however, in that I never had a problem quitting when either funds or the particular cigarette/cigar I was looking for became unavailable. I even had a technique that I perfected over the years. I'd stick a cigarette in my mouth, but not light it. The practice satisfied my oral fixation but it had another interesting benefit.

At industry events, especially in the 1990s when program-the-press

events (usually dubbed “Editor Days”) became all the rage, I would often find myself sitting in a room listening to someone drone on about the fabulous new product(s) the company had in development. On these occasions, I would don the reflective sunglasses that Ed Dille had wisely suggested I acquire if I was going to sleep through so many press conferences.

I would sit somewhat slouched, but with my arm bent at just the right angle to support my head. And with the presentation lights glittering off my shades, if you didn’t know me better, you’d swear that I was actually listening!

The other thing I’d do when trapped in a mind-numbing press gathering, however, was to suck on a cigarette. Again, I didn’t light it - couldn’t, since by then it was becoming against the law to smoke anywhere another human being might be able to see you. But just having that cancer stick between my lips would relax me enough to endure the unendurable. Like a lollipop that tasted like crap.

Only that’s not what happened. Invariably, some English programmer or a French designer or a Polish artist would tap me on the shoulder and urge me to follow them. “I saw you with that cigarette,” they would explain and nod knowingly. You see, Europe still hasn’t gone insane in the membrane over cigarette smoking and, as a result, most Europeans suffer like dogs when they visit the US on business and learn, for example, that the San Francisco Airport doesn’t even let you smoke *outside in the street*.

These generous souls naturally assumed I was a poor Yank in a similar situation and took pity, kindly transporting me to some isolated location they had uncovered where we could both smoke our coffin nails and discuss what was *really* going on at the company behind all the “smoke” and mirrors.

#### (Coin-Ops)

Unless you’re one of those non-linear readers who jump all over the place in lieu of consuming a book from cover to cover, you’ve probably been wondering now and again throughout this chapter what, exactly, coin-ops have to do with sex and drugs.

First of all, coin-ops were the original game medium to addict users to these new electronic games. They were bold, wild, innovative, and, for the first 15 years of the electronic game explosion, arcades were the fountain-head from which the truly original and revolutionary ideas in the game business sprang.

Coin-ops were sexy, addictive...plus I have a story that involves sex, drugs and coin-ops. So live with it.

But first, let me tell you about the coin-op business in the late-’70s and

early-'80s. There were several levels of companies making and marketing arcade (or coin-operated, hence coin-op) games. At the top stood the giants: Atari, Bally-Midway, and, to a lesser extent, Gottlieb and Stern were the companies that sprang immediately to mind, the latter three having been around since the days of pinball. Atari and Midway, in particular, were masters at creating not just the coin-op games themselves, but at forging machines that were masterpieces of the arcade art.

I remember visiting Bally-Midway while its team was busy creating a coin-op based on the then-forthcoming Disney computer game movie, *Tron*. I had seen the plans and screen shots, but when I walked into the slightly darkened office where the actual prototype cabinet and working game were housed, my eyes almost left my head, Tex Avery-style.

What a magnificent thing that game was, standing proudly like some futuristic progeny of a Wurlitzer jukebox and a UFO. Blue lights shot through the entire cabinet, with a large color monitor sunken into the recesses of this electronic sculpture. The centerpiece was a massive, internally-illuminated blue pistol-grip joystick that rose from the center of the control panel like the masthead of a ship.

The games these companies produced were as individual as snowflakes. The designers, artists and programmers were flat out the best in the world. It was their ideas that kept the home game business going well into the '80s. Nolan Bushnell's game ideas, for example, pre-*Pong*, were routinely rejected by companies like Bally-Midway, according to Jim Jarocki, a Bally executive who ran the arcade operation in the early '80s. And the phrase that gamers most wanted to hear with regard to the latest home cartridge was invariably "arcade quality."

Each arcade game was created by an entire team of artists and craftsmen, from the shape of the cabinet to the choice of monitor. Unlike home videogames, which could only be played using the raster scan technology employed by TV sets, arcade developers were free to design games for different types of monitors, such as the popular vector graphics technology used in games such as Atari's *Asteroids*, *Battlezone*, *Red Baron* and (in color!) *Tempest*. The advantage of vector monitors was the amazingly bright, evenly-lit lines it could create. While raster scan gave us the stair step line, vector graphics were straight as a laser beam. Of course, at least until color vector was developed, the downside was the games' unique wireframe, crystalline look which was only appropriate for certain types of games.

Atari called its vector technology system "Quadrascans" but vector graphics by any other name burned those lines just as brightly (one company, Cinematronics, got into vector games early and turned out several classic titles - *Star Castle*, *Starhawk*, etc - despite the fact that it

was a relatively small operation). Also, unlike other arcade companies, Atari's coin-op division never licensed anybody else's game for coin-op use. While Midway had picked up *Pac-Man*'s US arcade rights from its Japanese owner, Namco, Atari always relied on its own brilliant designers to create original coin-op franchises that would be Atari's exclusively and would make money on Atari's home videogame and computer systems when their days in the arcades were done.

The art which decorated the sides of the game cabinet was always first rate, as was the backlit header which appeared at the top front of the game and advertised the product's name and developer. As for the cabinets, they were often works of art as well, designed and sculpted specifically to create the coolest possible physical context in which to play that game.

The next level of companies comprised a mix of licensors, such as Centauri, which picked up the Japanese *Space Invaders* clones that the big boys couldn't fit into their schedule. Universal brought us the marvelous *Ladybug* as well as the *Mr. Do* games. Meanwhile, some Japanese developers, such as Nintendo, began to install their games in American arcades without going through a US-based middleman.

All the way at the bottom were companies that were so small and produced so few games that they had to rely on something truly unique in every game to attract players. In Pacific Novelty's *Shark Attack*, the player controlled the shark, sending streams of blood-red pixels through the blue water as it attacked diver after diver. And in the same company's *Thief*, the gimmick was a tape loop of Police Band radio calls which ran in the background and fooled many gamers into believing they were actually linked to their vehicle's location.

But perhaps the major influences on the changing arcade world were small companies such as SNK and Data East who tried a new twist on the coin-op business. These companies introduced "kits" to arcade operators who were spent out following the waning days of the *Pac-Man* Boom. Following the public's wild reaction to *Dragon's Lair*, every major company had to have its own laserdisc game. Operators were dazzled by the likes of Sega's *Astron Belt* and Atari's *Firefox* when they saw them at trade shows like the AMOA. So, they ordered too many of the expensive machines. Sure enough, laserdisc games proved a short-lived fad, but before they disappeared, they left many arcades boarded up.

The kits, on the other hand, were a boon to the arcade operators. You purchased a basic cabinet from a company such as SNK for a couple hundred bucks. These cabinets were essentially glorified videogame rigs with built-in monitors. They came with a set of art pieces that slid into a set of brackets mounted on the sides of the cabinet and a plastic header that was similarly inserted across the top face of the system. Finally, the owner

removed a large game cartridge and inserted it into a ROM slot at the bottom of the cabinet.

When these machines stopped earning, however, the arcade owners would simply buy a new kit, consisting of new side art, header and a new game cartridge. The difference between a laserdisc game that might cost \$1,000 and a kit which could be acquired for a few hundred was the difference between staying in business and cashing out for many arcades. But of course the kit games tended to be ugly and uninspired, with a few notable exceptions. When you go from making unique systems to generic ones, it generally spills over into the games. And while the cheaper kits kept the arcades breathing through the '90s, they basically offered a quality of game that home systems could match and occasionally surpass, giving gamers less reason to dump their tokens at the arcades.

As I mentioned earlier, I had a story to tell that involved drugs, sex and coin-ops. I was on a trip to Florida where I had meetings with several smaller companies located in the Orlando area. Accompanying me was a young woman, who we'll call Cathi, since that is not her real name, a tall, beautiful girl to whom I was instantly attracted. But I had been asked, before the trip, not to get into trouble with this girl. Romantic involvement between co-workers often end badly and while I had never had that problem before, I suspect that everybody suspected I was going to make a play for her once we got there.

For my part, I was determined to be a good boy. I was really hot for this woman, but she was getting her first big shot after several years of working as an assistant/secretary and I was not going to screw that up.

The trip went quite pleasantly, though in the early-'80s the area around Orlando was a little under-developed. Street names were often painted on rocks and left sitting on the corner lawn, making us late for almost every appointment and leaving my poor driver (to this day, I do not drive) a nervous wreck.

But when the first day was over, we headed for our motel to check in and all the minor inconveniences disappeared like a bad dream after awakening. Cathi had managed to secure us lodging at absolutely the coolest motel I have ever seen in my life. Covered in foliage, it was one of those places where each room has a "theme." I, for example, had an "Indian" (read: Native American) room, with the faces of noble-looking Hunkpappa and Cheyenne carved into the wooden facing of the massive bed's backboard.

Every bed in this place was massive, clearly intended for two. Cathi, meanwhile, had gotten herself the Arabian Nights room, complete with veiled, heart-shaped bed and a huge spa-type tub. As I arrived in her room, she

asked me to take pictures of her in the “Arabian” bed, which of course I did. We then changed into our bathing suits and headed down to the pool.

The pool was one of those pseudo-natural masterpieces, complete with waterfalls and grottos. The entire pool was covered by an intricate wooden trellis through which all manner of foliage grew wild, allowing the sun access to the water only in small, wavering patches. Alone in the pool, we had that feeling of being the last people on Earth. We swam and played and absolutely reveled in the chintzy but glorious accommodations.

As the sun dropped, chilling the water slightly, we decided to eat dinner. The motel’s restaurant extended out onto poolside and we found ourselves mere footsteps from a picnic-style table with a breathtaking view of the sunset. I had shrimp and it was absolutely incredible. She had some sort of fish and a Margarita or two.

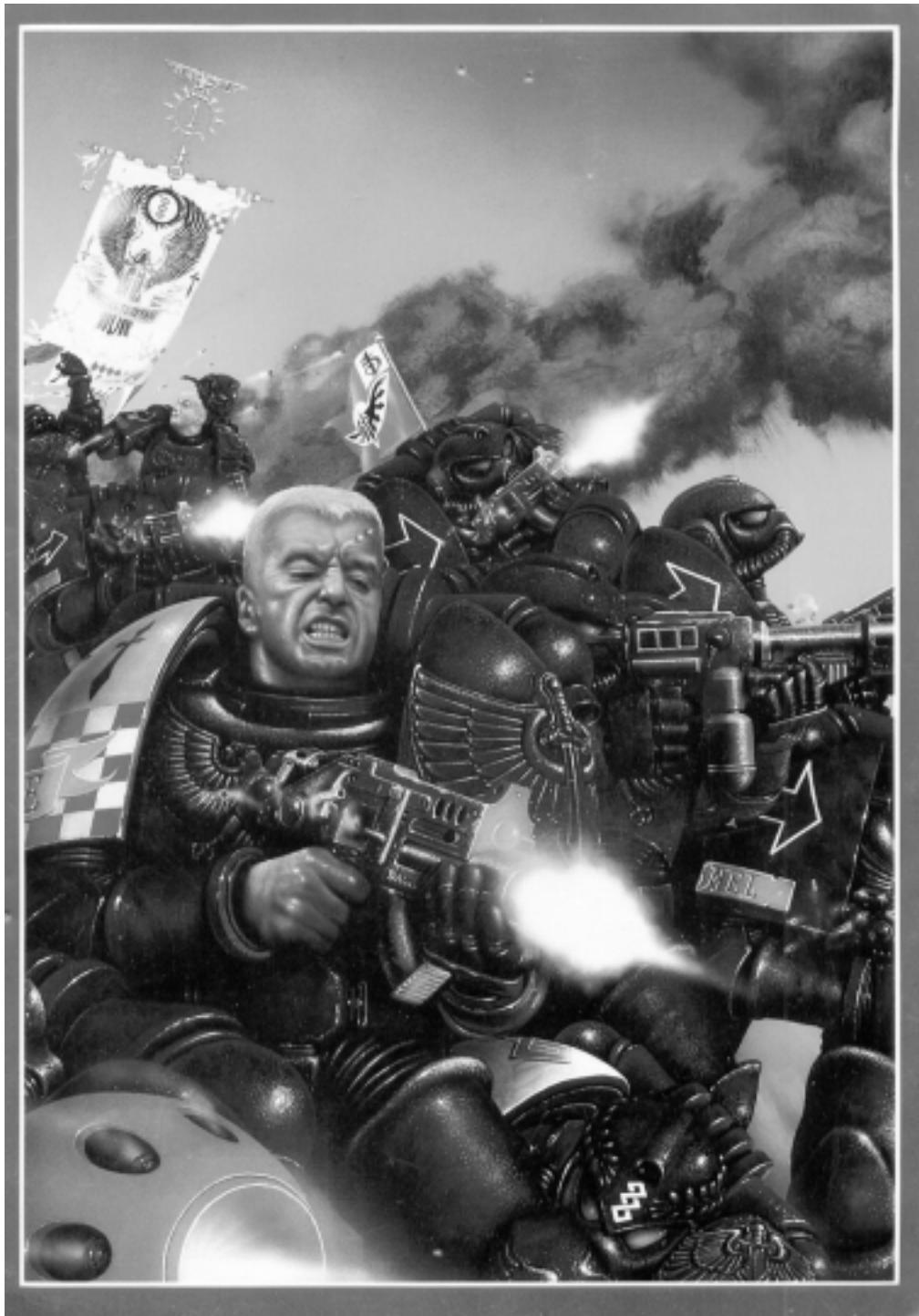
If this portion of the trip had been set up as a form of test, an experiment to see if I could control myself, it could not have been any crueler. We talked and laughed and finally she said she guessed it was time to go to bed. My heart slowed down as I realized that the examination was over and I had passed.

Then, as we made our way inside the motel, she said it. “Now I have to go back to that big bed all alone!” she muttered, depressed. I absolutely froze and for whatever reason, the only thing I could think of to say was: “But - I promised I’d be a good boy on this trip!”

She looked at me, probably aware that she had drunk a little more than she should have. And with a look somewhere between regret and relief, she said, “That’s okay. You are a good boy.”

They say that in life it’s the opportunities you don’t take that you regret in your later years. But in this case, I have never regretted my inaction in all these years. The last thing that girl needed was to get romantically involved - especially in a place so romantic that the Elephant Man probably could have scored - in the middle of a business trip.

As it is, nothing could have been more beautiful than that swim and that dinner, taking pictures in her room and laughing as we made our way back to the theme rooms. So instead of pumping up my ego, I simply went back to my room, smoked a couple of joints (see, I told you there were drugs in this story) and fell asleep in my great big bed, beneath the flaring nostrils of a wooden Indian.



*Of course, all the major companies sent the press holiday cards, but did anyone ever capture the spirit of the season like this warm and fuzzy Games Workshop greeting? I seriously doubt it...*

# The Day the Gaming Died

(December 7, 1984)

All in all, it was a relief.

The arrival of 1984 did not see us living in the totally regimented, totalitarian world that George Orwell predicted in his grim novel titled after that year. Ronald Reagan was president and would be re-elected that year, but that's as far as it went.

For home videogames, however, the future was dystopian indeed.

When Activision launched the first third party software for the VCS, Atari thought the sky was falling. In fact, the infusion of third party software only made the VCS more viable and the parade of second rate software being churned out by companies such as Games by Apollo, US Games, Telesys, Data Age, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Xonox, Mystique, Spectravision, and Avalon-Hill only made the Atari brand product seem especially big league.

The VCS was killed more by its own internal limitations than by the pollution of its software pool, though the latter did become a factor by the holiday season of 1984. Retailers found themselves overstocked with VCS games that were so awful you couldn't give them away, so they began to attempt just that.

It became common to see a large crate full of VCS games in the entryway to electronic stores with every game in the heap selling for \$5 or less.

The previous Christmas, people had been willing to pay as much as \$75 to buy the hottest and hardest-to-find Atari games.

It therefore became difficult for those same retailers to try and sell premiere VCS product at \$40-\$50 with a straight face. But had anyone put a gun to these retailers' heads and forced them to buy 20 copies of *Lost Luggage*? The reality was that most of the retailers, even those who attended CES, rarely had any clue as to what distinguished good product from bad, so they covered their asses by buying it all, or so they thought. Had they, in fact, used even the slightest discrimination in their software purchases, they would have come out of the first generation of programmable console games well into the black.

In Japan, meanwhile, Nintendo was watching as this glut of miserable software appeared to be hopelessly gumming up the Atari's gears. As a result, Nintendo would put a lock on the Famicom/NES that would give the company total control over its software market. Nintendo would decree to third party publishers which games it could release and how many copies of each would be made available (after all, Nintendo would be selling them

their chips).

Ironically, Atari had a chance to sell the Famicom as its own next generation system when Nintendo made them just that offer in 1983. But, for whatever reason, the deal never happened and eventually Nintendo got tired of waiting and decided to sell the machine in the US on its own.

But in truth, the gears of the VCS were simply wearing down. Much like Ford's Model T, it had enjoyed a great run, but eventually became obsolete and buyers had to be romanced into moving on to new technology.

This is where Atari totally blew it. The 5200 was a disaster, offering mostly duplicate versions of the Atari's 400/800 computer games and horrific, non-centering joysticks. But rather than fix the problem, Atari went to panic mode and rushed the rollout of its 7800, a genuine next-generation system that was not only compatible with the 2600, but introduced both an encryption chip (Atari would control the third party operators on this system) and the GCC-produced "MARIA" chip, the most impressive piece of gaming technology of its day.

Unfortunately, the announcement of the 7800's existence completely freaked the retailers, who were still wondering why nobody was buying the 5200. Consumers, especially the loyal "early adopters" who had purchased the 5200, felt betrayed and people began to wonder if Atari was going to be announcing a new hardware system every year.

Atari was soon in such bad shape that it was forced to sell out that year to the hated Tramiel clan (who had just made their fortune selling the Commodore 64). Jack Tramiel held a famous press conference following the acquisition in which he appeared behind a long table containing the entire Atari product line, including the 7800. Then, in a flamboyant gesture, he swept the contents of the table onto the floor, announcing that henceforth, this sort of product would not be appearing under the Atari name.

He was, however, a trifle ahead of himself. Whatever plans the Tramiels had for Atari, nothing seemed to come of them. Suddenly, it was two years later, the NES was a big hit and Atari, in one of its periodic cash crunches, finally decided to release the now-outdated 7800 (along with other oddities from the past, such as the 2600jr, a smaller version of the VCS).

Of course in the fall of 1984 things weren't going any better at Magnavox, Mattel or Coleco than they were at Atari.

The <sup>3</sup>Odyssey was never even released since its sole showing at a CES convinced even the <sup>3</sup>Odyssey loyalists that the system was a dead duck. The <sup>3</sup>Odyssey was essentially the <sup>2</sup>Odyssey with background graphics. They had even taken some <sup>2</sup>Odyssey games, added background colors and put them on the exhibit floor to universal derision.

Mattel, meanwhile, seemed to be losing its marbles, putting out a special audio peripheral and one or two pieces of compatible software for

its Intellivision while giving brief glimpses of the Intellivision II to top distributors and selected members of the press in a secured room on the CES showroom floor. Then there were musical keyboards, a machine called the Aquarius and heaven only knows how many other ersatz products that got flushed down the drain as part of the overall industry crash.

The Colecovision, possessing the newest technology of the first generation programmable systems, put less pressure on Coleco to launch a next gen system, despite the fact that the coin-op games which were the system's bread and butter were also going into a slump. Instead, the company poured its resources into a home computer, dubbed the Adam and tricked up with more promises than a presidential campaign.

Upon release, it was an instant disaster.

From the point of view of most American retailers, videogames had been a fad. They had come, they had peaked and now they would go the way of the hula hoop and the lava lamp. The industry crashed and burned. VCS software became death in the marketplace, with stories of landfills stuffed with *Pac-Man* carts filling the air.

Needless to say, none of this was good news for *Electronic Games*. Where we had once published Christmas issues stuffed to the gills with advertising, by the fall of '84, we were looking at something like 12 pages of ads total. And, as anyone who has ever worked in the magazine business will tell you, editorial page counts are based on the number of ad pages. Magazines, in most cases, don't make that much from sales and subscriptions; the money is in the ad pages.

Our East Coast Sales rep quit to find a job where she could actually sell something and a new sales chief was hired to get us through this terrible slump. The arrival of this woman in the office spelled the beginning of the end for *Electronic Games*.

I believe she came over from *Family Computing*, one of those magazines that made me gag with their articles about how mom could use the "family computer" and a dot matrix printer to generate paper dolls. Computing, by its nature, was a solitary activity. Families gathered around the TV to watch or play videogames; they didn't gather around the computer.

Nonetheless, panic produces some strange offspring. There began to be a feeling—and our sales lady was successfully pitching it to our publisher—that terms such as "games" and "fun" were somehow...juvenile.

They were not alone in that opinion. For now, you see, we had entered the Computer Epoch. No longer would we "play games" on these machineries of joy; rather, we would Experience Simulations. Games were suddenly viewed as almost a misuse of this wonderful technology that man had created. True, games had been the foot in the door, the thing that first

made computers palatable to the masses, but surely their time had come and gone.

Of course, this was all delusion. The masses would not be buying computers for quite a few years yet and people never lost their love of games, only the opportunity to exercise it. Even so, Arnie had suggested that we change the name of the magazine to *Electronic Entertainment* as far back as the previous Christmas.

Several things led up to the events of December 7, 1984.

First, there was the fact that our new Sales Fuehrer hated Arnie almost from the first second she met him. The degree to which she disliked him was positively visceral. He certainly wasn't crazy about her, but there was nothing personal in it on his part; she was merely tearing down something we had lovingly constructed over many years; something that had made a lot of money for Reese Communications.

She certainly couldn't sell our ads, but she could interfere in editorial like no ad salesperson we had ever worked with. Oddly enough, she and I got along. She liked me and while I disagreed with almost all her ideas, I don't believe she saw me as a threat. She had an agenda and at the top of it was getting a new editor for *Electronic Games*, or whatever it was going to be called. If she could do it, she wanted me on her side.

Then there's the other hand. Despite the fact that the industry was crashing down around our ears, Arnie seemed almost serenely oblivious to the maneuvering that was going on around him. He continued to arrive late and leave early. He bragged about big money offers that he was turning down and rubbed a lot of the new employees the wrong way.

Once we moved to the new office, you see, Jay realized that the company could no longer be the Mom & Pop-type operation it had been. So, suddenly we had a creepy CFO who bought his own chair (the offices all came with perfectly good chairs, of course, but this guy got himself a black leather throne that Darth Vader might have fancied) and a new editor at *Video*. That was Doug Garr, a nice enough fellow but one of the early hackers (and the first guy at Reese Communications to bring his own Apple II into the office) and he had no love of or interest in games.

Bruce Apar's departure came as a shock. It was almost as if Jay felt the need to shed himself of all the remnants of that old office. He was a big shot now and wanted a new cast of characters surrounding him. Even his loyal secretary/receptionist who was with Reese forever was let go near the end.

Everything was changing and Arnie was the next person scheduled to get changed.

I was in the office on a full-time basis (always arriving and departing late) and was suddenly getting all the face time with Jay. I understood why

he was unhappy with Arnie, but I saw no way that the magazine could go on without him. Who could they hire who would have even half of Arnie's credibility and contacts in the industry?

As for me taking his place, I made it clear that that was not in the cards. And it was less out of friendship or altruism than the fact that I did not want to be the guy who had to go to all the meetings, assign and track all the articles and deal with the sales people. They knew I was a good writer and a good editor but I always took a little less money and the executive editor slot, where I was comfortable and safe.

By November, Jay was interviewing people for Arnie's job, but Arnie wasn't in the office enough to realize it. I will also admit that at the time he and I were having personal problems as well. Still and all, by the first week of December, I couldn't take it any more.

Arnie had, as usual, left the office early and taken a taxi back to Brooklyn Heights. I called there and Joyce answered the phone.

"Joyce?" I began. "It's Bill. I have some very bad news. Jay's going to fire Arnie."

There was silence on the other end of the phone for quite a while. Then: "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"I better put him on."

"Okay."

I heard them talking briefly before Arnie picked up the phone. As always in moments of crisis, his voice was very soft and calming. "What's wrong, Bill?"

"You're going to be fired," I told him.

"I don't think so."

"Yeah, you are."

"Who could Jay hire to replace me?"

"I don't know. I guess he doesn't either; that's probably why he's been interviewing people."

"For my job?"

"It's real, Arn. It's happening."

"Okay. Thanks for telling me, Bill. Who else is getting fired?"

"I don't know." Which was true.

"You?"

"No, apparently they want me to stay on."

"Always the loveable one, aren't you?"

"Yeah, well, I guess nobody takes me that seriously. So, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

The next day, there was a tension in the air—and not just because it was

the 43<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor (in fact, it would be the Japanese who would rescue us this time, but that was still several years away).

Arnie was fuming and the more he thought about Jay interviewing replacements for him just down the hall, the angrier he became. So he got up, walked down the hall and into Jay's office, where he spoke loudly enough for most of the office to hear.

"So, Jay, I hear I'm going to be fired."

No response.

"Well, if you're going to do it, be man enough to do it now."

Jay said: "Okay. You're fired. And so is Joyce and Tracie [Forman]."

As Arnie left the building, I felt my stomach lurch. For almost four years it had been an incredible trip, but obviously we were now on a different route.

I hung on at Reese through the end of the year, even collecting a \$300 bonus at Christmas. Doug Garr was now editor of both *Video* and *Electronic Games* and I quickly saw that we weren't going to see eye to eye.

"I can't work with him," I told Jay. "He doesn't like games, doesn't play games and doesn't know games."

"Well, we're going to be dealing with different things, Bill, not just games."

"Then you don't need me. I'm a game writer; if you want a magazine about computers, which I don't understand, Jay, since you refuse to even use one yourself, I don't want to edit it or write for it."

"What can we do?"

"Bring back Arnie."

"That's not happening."

"Well, I'm not working with Doug."

Jay called in the sales lady who told me that my leaving would be like abandoning a child. "You brought this magazine into the world," she cajoled. "It shouldn't go on without you."

"It had two parents," I reminded her.

And that was it. Arnie, meanwhile, had been busy getting everything ready to hit CES, which would be held in Las Vegas the week after New Years. He would be attempting to start up a consulting operation and he was going to use CES to sign up enough clients to keep the business viable. They needed to know if I would be going to CES with them or with Reese.

I was going with them, of course. And thus was born Katz Kunkel Worley, or KKW as it came to be known. It was a struggle at first, with lots of lean times, especially for me. I had gone to Jay and asked him to fire me so I could collect unemployment. He laughed.

“You’re too much,” he decided. “No, Bill, I’m sorry but I can’t do that.”

“Okay, Jay,” I told him. “See you in court.”

I had no idea what I could sue him for and no intention of litigating against him if I could, but I knew lawsuits—even the prospect of a lawsuit—terrified Jay. His mother must have been frightened by a subpoena. But I was angry at Jay, feeling that the new office had changed him and so I said the thing I knew would piss him off the most.

I also believed with all my heart that electronic games were here to stay, in whatever format.

I’ve often thought in the ensuing years about what might have been if *Electronic Games* had simply gone quarterly and ridden out the crash. We would have come out the other side in 1986 when the NES hit and we would have had the kind of credibility that money couldn’t buy.

But that didn’t happen. They kept printing my stuff that was in inventory over the last few issues before they changed the name and eventually hung it up, transferring all the subscriptions over to *Video*.

Thankfully, I wasn’t there to see it. I said my goodbyes and headed out the door for the last time before boarding a train for Brooklyn Heights and the first KKW planning session.

Bill Kunkel

## BILL ELLIOTT'S NASCAR CHALLENGE



**KONAMI**

*I don't even remember meeting this guy, but then I hate any sport that involves racing. Unless there's guns mounted on the cars!*

# Getting in the Habitat

(1985-1987)

It is in the nature of things that groundbreaking developments are often forgotten, overlooked for years. This piece is the story of one of the great, forgotten experiments in the history of electronic gaming, a precursor to today's Persistent Worlds (a term I dislike because it implies that the developers have built a world that's sticking around whether you want it to or not). Of course, while Persistent Worlds may not ring my bell, it's certainly miles ahead of Massively Multi-Player On-Line Role-Playing Games when it's time to roll it off the old tongue.

The game business, being a technology driven world, has often attempted new and offbeat ideas in terms of engaging players on a new level of interactivity. I seem to recall, for example, during the height of the obsession with obtaining high scores on classic videogames, one pioneering company developed a new spin on the traditional Vanity Board. A vanity board, as all readers of this book probably already know, is the screen which pops up at the end of a coin-op game, listing the top scores along with the cognomen of the player who attained it. Most early vanity boards, however, did not have sufficient space to allow the gamer to enter in their entire name, leaving them only two to four characters with which to identify themselves.

Thus we saw an entire generation of arcade sharpshooters adopting *nom de games* such as DRD (which could be "Dread" or could be my fellow physician, "Dr. D"; the "D" of course stood for "Death."), KILR or simply the player's initials.

The idea this particular coin-op company developed was to install a primitive digital camera or conventional camera and scanner set-up into one of their machines. The camera was set at average head height and would allow the top players to display not only their kills but their kissers as well on the game's vaunted vanity board.

It may be gaming's version of urban legend, but we soon thereafter received several reports indicating that the experiment had gone awry and been abruptly cancelled when an innovative player with a new high score decided to celebrate by standing on a chair, dropping his trousers, and delivering unto the camera lens a moon shot rather than a capture of his countenance.

So we see that sometimes, new ideas work, and sometimes they fall on their moon shot.

But there was one project that, by certain standards, could only be declared a failure. But when applying more perspective, it was among the most successful and innovative projects in the history of the Internet. By any standards, however, it was a milestone in the development of massively multiplayer games.

I speak of the creation of *Habitat*, the first multi-user program to feature on-screen avatars in a fully-formed world. This event occurred early in the evolution of Lucasfilm Games (now LucasArts), when the new shop was contracted by Quantum Link to produce the first on-line Persistent World.

But before we go there, a few words are in order regarding Quantum Link itself.

Around 1982-83, a larger-than-life character named Bill Von Meister created an operation called GameLine. It was a subscription service, a sort of precursor to the Sega Channel, whereby users could download Atari VCS games via a crude dial-up modem configuration.

It was a great idea, but it was ahead of its time, as several other downloadable game companies found out during the VCS era. I'll never forget the personal demo we received in the company's suite at the Winter CES in 1982. In the early-'80s, phone service in Las Vegas was not top of the line. So imagine it during CES, with hundreds of thousands of calls being made every day by convention attendees alone. Now try to imagine getting a 9-baud modem to hook in and download a game in the midst of that technological tangle.

GameLine lasted less than a year before it was purchased by a small company in Virginia where a fellow named Steve Case had a similar yet vastly different idea in mind - he was going to launch his own, closed-circuit vision of the Internet.

The project was designated Quantum Link but was soon known as simply QLink. To get on board this incarnation of the "Infobahn" that was the talk of the day, one purchased a QLink floppy disk and then registered with the service. QLink was limited to Commodore 64 users, the Commodore 64 being the dominant home computer at the time. Finally, running on modems as powerful as 12-baud, users could enter an environment that had deliberately NOT been created for hackers by hackers.

QLink was structured so that a person of normal intelligence could figure out pretty much the entire system in a matter of minutes. Which was a good thing, since that was how you paid for it: by the minute. All across the country, people became "addicted" to the system. Unlike outfits such as Compuserve (and the even more forbidding The Source), which were, if anything, user hostile, QLink was intended as the Internet for Dummies.

To a large degree, QLink was simply a predictable reaction to its stiff-necked competition. For example, while QLink offered its users their

own choice of online handle (as long as nobody else already owned it or it was deemed too naughty) while Compuserve tended to assign such euphonious onscreen names as “11145564h90I.”

QLink was designed to be as intuitive as possible for the army of interested users who were not inclined toward the programmer mentality. QLink also introduced innovations such as the Chat Room, where any number of members could converse without interruption. This was accomplished simply by having the users themselves designate the name of the room, thereby assuring their privacy.

The big downside, of course, was the whole pay-by-the-minute billing system. Somehow, the idea that one could get out of bed on a sleepless night, sign on to QLink and, within a matter of minutes (sometimes many, many minutes) you were hooked up with people ready to talk about books, movies, videogames, pro wrestling and just about any other subject you could think of, was compelling beyond belief. You were never alone; there were always souls, much like yourself, strolling through the various public and private rooms of QLink.

The appeal proved addictive for many, with husbands and/or wives - and, inevitably, children - often rolling up massive monthly bills.

Fortunately, the fact that Arnie and I gave online seminars for Steve Case not only earned us a small paycheck but, far more importantly, garnered us “unlimited time” on QLink. In other words, we could stay online forever and were never billed a penny. It felt much like what I imagine it would be like to have a super power.

“Stand back, villain! I’ve got...Unlimited Time!”

The other problem, of course, was the sexual component. Long before America became terrified by the realization that pederasts were enjoying a chicken hawk’s heaven with all those naïve boys and girls out there online, there was the simple issue of folks hooking up via QLink. People, often married, who would never have considered visiting a meat market-style pick-up bar and going home with a stranger, suddenly found themselves involved in red hot correspondences via QLink that often led to the same conclusion.

Remember, this was the birth of digital communication, and most of the players hadn’t yet gotten hip to the fact that many of the self-described leggy blondes with racks you could hang a side of beef from were, in reality, 15-year-old boys having a prank. And of course, no one is ever unattractive online. Everybody this side of the Elephant Man has at least one picture of themselves where they look halfway decent. So, even when authentic photos were exchanged, what you saw was very rarely what you got.

The online courtship process quickly developed a protocol. After some steamy exchanges in a private chat room, the pair would agree to “go voice,”

i.e., talk on the telephone. Once that was done, there was apparently no concern whatsoever that the person you were speaking to might have been a serial killer. Long-standing relationships were destroyed and instant love affairs burnt out seemingly overnight.

As I'm sure many of the readers already know, QLink eventually spread to the PC (where PCLink and TandyLink started up as independent internet locales) and eventually to all computer systems as part of founder Steve Case's new vision - America OnLine.

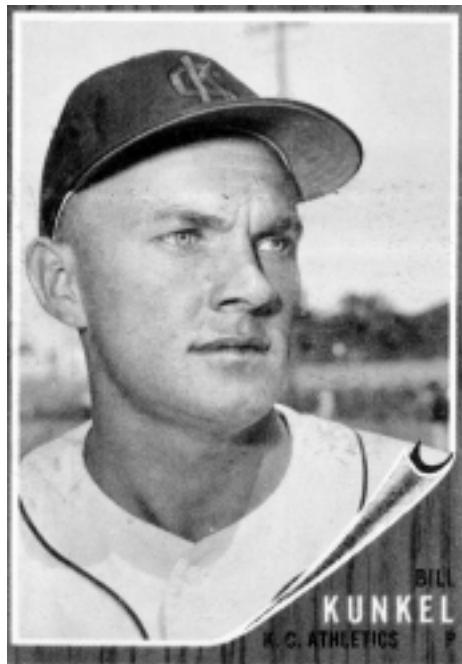
It's funny, but residue from the old hacker hatred of intuitive systems that were easy enough for even the despised non-programmer types to use remains with us. True, AOL, as it is often known, even among members, can come on like the mind police at times, but in terms of a user-friendly system, its vast success certainly serves as empirical evidence of the fact that people simply like it.

But the programming community still holds such contempt not only for AOL but for AOL users that I was once dis-invited from participating in an ongoing online trivia game because the person who ran the game (and still runs it - we've become pals in the interim) informed me that only people

who are part of the electronic games business were allowed to play.

With my usual cool under fire I shot back a note suggesting he Google my name (reminding him, as I do all potential Bill Kunkel Googlers, that I am NOT the dead baseball player of the same name) and then decide if I was worthy of playing trivia with John Romero. In return, I received a sincerely apologetic email explaining that the game master couldn't believe I was "the" Bill Kunkel because why would the Game Doctor be hanging out on...ewwww...AOL?

Well, for one thing I've got broadband and it's less than \$10 a month to run an AOL account if your primary ISP is on broadband. For another, I've had the same email address now for 20 years, more or less (my original handle was Potshot, but when QLink became AOL, all the old names got dumped so I became PotshotK@aol.com and have been for about 15 years), and that's like



*There certainly is a resemblance, and I'm told that all the Kunkels are at least distantly related, but otherwise there is no relationship between me and this deceased major league ballplayer (and later head umpire in the American League), other than the fact that he screws up my search engine pages.*

keeping the same phone number for decades. Everybody remembers it and informing everyone you know of an address change is a potential nightmare.

In any case, even in the '80s, QLink had a good thing going, but Case had a more ambitious vision. What if they could create a different kind of community - a visually viable community? Case turned to George Lucas for the answer. Lucas was just starting up his computer game shop at the time and programmers Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar (with help from just about everybody else in the company at one point or another) set out to create a new kind of interactive experience.

They called it "*Habitat*."

The idea was that users would no longer be comprised simply of their text handles. They would be represented by on-screen avatars, virtual surrogates that could be designed by the user to look male or female with a variety of hair styles, clothing, etc. Moreover, when the users spoke to one another, it was still via text, but now the dialogue appeared in a comic book-style word balloon in order to heighten the illusion of reality.

The *Habitat* itself was a large area, with both urban and wilderness locales, but its creators soon discovered that no matter how deft their programming and no matter how cleverly the system was designed, users - even the hand-picked testers who helped shape the game during its years in development - sometimes don't cooperate. What you expected, or even demanded, might be blown off in an instant if the user thought they were still playing within the rules.

On the other hand, the users often provided brilliant solutions and uncovered weaknesses that could have destroyed the entire project. For example, the designers set up a treasure hunt at one point and designed it in such a way that guaranteed users would be involved in it for weeks, maybe months. Then one player discovered a weakness in the program structure and solved the entire thing in approximately 15 minutes, thereby ending the hunt before most of the players even had a chance to get started.

Then there was the user whose avatar started a religion for the citizens of *Habitat* - the Order of the Holy Walnut, which became an actual force within the virtual world. Members of the church were forbidden to carry weapons, steal or participate in violence.

Much of *Habitat* was devoted to the acquisition of goods, either through the currency provided within the game, gambling or puzzle solving. But wouldn't you know it, the players quickly discovered an even easier way to obtain goods - they stole them from other avatars.

The *Habitat* world was set up so that items could be simply taken from one avatar by another. Or an avatar might put an object down for an instant and, wham, another user surrogate would slip in and make off with it.

Eventually, rather sophisticated systems were set up, including public meetings in the different communities to establish civilization on the frontiers of cyberspace. But when the problem got serious, the designers had to step in.

From a play mechanic standpoint, the biggest difference between communicating with people in traditional QLink and in *Habitat* was the matter of death. As in any game - and *Habitat* presented a macro-universe built on game-based values - you lost a life occasionally. But all that meant was that you lost your inventory and had to bring back your avatar and start all over again.

Even so, many players felt it was a disturbing component. They had invested much time in their avatars and they simply didn't feel they should be killed off without consequences, as if it were a game of *Space Invaders* or *Pac-Man*.

Worse still, the ability to kill within *Habitat* seemed to bring out a rather nasty streak in many of the play testers. Soon, bands of brigands were moving through the villages, killing indiscriminately and looting the dead. And when the designers polled the play testers on the question of whether killing should be part of the game, the vote was, needless to say, split directly down the middle.

The designers responded by limiting mayhem to the wilderness areas, leaving citizens of the towns and villages (read: civilization) free to walk the streets without fear of assassination and theft. But even then, the half of the community which opposed death within this virtual world began to make crude attempts at establishing justice systems, but without the cooperation of the real gods - the designers and programmers - there wasn't much the lawful citizens could do by way of punishment to lawbreakers.

Eventually, an actual election was held and an avatar was voted in as Sheriff of the town of Populopolis. But what could the designers do to empower this sheriff, whose only authority came from the respect in which the other citizens held him or her. The designers agonized over what course they should take next. Should the law enforcement figures elected in each locale have the sole power to kill? What if a rogue steals their gun, or the sheriff is forced into the wilderness and is captured?

Alas, before any solution could be tested, the project was more or less abandoned by the folks at QLink.

Many urban legends - or at least what I believe to be urban legends - have developed surrounding *Habitat* over the years, including the story that groups of male characters would assault and rape female characters. And most gamers who are even familiar with this landmark project believe it was a failure because of the uncontrollable and unpredictable behavior of the beta testers.

In fact, *Habitat* was a victim of technology. When development began in 1985, the Commodore 64 was far and away the dominant computer in the home market and QLink was tied to the C64 at the hip. But the game took so long to develop that by 1987 when it was nearing launch, the next generation of 16-bit computers - the Commodore Amiga and the Atari ST - were already well in play.

QLink decided to cut its losses and opted for a vastly scaled-down and rather boring optional attraction dubbed "Club Caribe" which lasted through the rest of QLink's run. Lucasfilm, meanwhile, sold *Habitat* to Fujitsu, which translated the program into Japanese and ran it successfully for years as *WorldsAway*. It was subsequently sold back to the USA when Electric Communities acquired the North American rights.

But the real legacy of *Habitat* remains, especially in two areas. One was the interface, which was successfully transported to a tremendously successful series of LucasArts adventure games, including *Curse of Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion*. The other, of course, is the very concept of the massively multi-player game environment itself.

[Note: For a more detailed and academic evaluation of the *Habitat* project by the developers themselves, go to <http://www.fudco.com/chip/lessons.html>]

Bill Kunkel

# **DAKSEY**

*and The Second City*



*Cover to the keepsake from the Second City CES performance.*

## House Call

(1987)

I always felt that one of the great advantages of being The Game Doctor was that I didn't have to put up with the kind of crap real doctors must endure. Remember, outside a very small circle, the identity of the Game Doctor was a complete mystery to both the readers of the various magazines we appeared in as well as most of the industry itself - until I finally outed myself in the last issue of the '90s incarnation of *Electronic Games*.

I had learned over the years that most people believed Arnie was the Doc. Some guessed Joyce and there was another contingent altogether who believed the Game Doc was a distinct, fourth person altogether. Very few if any readers guessed that I was indeed The Game Doctor. I thought that was cool; it felt good to have created a personality so different from the one I presented under my own name that nobody recognized me behind the textual mask. So I started writing reviews under pseudonyms such as "Will Richardson" (my grandfather's name) and tried on a different perspective and style with each name.

As a very young child, I had a large collection of hats - fireman, cowboy, cop, bus driver (that came with one of those coin changers for my belt), etc.—and my parents swore that I could change personas completely each time I doffed a new chapeau. This need to play a variety of roles manifested itself through the '70s, when I went from writing comic books to playing guitar and keyboards in a rock band to editing, writing, and taking ringside photos for our wrestling magazine, *Main Event*, and then immersing myself in the world of videogames.

But once the game stuff became full time, despite the fact that I was established as a journalist, I still found the compulsion to change hats irresistible. Thus I could be Bill Kunkel, Will Richardson, the Game Doctor, or the name I used on the game column I wrote for *Faces*, the heavy metal magazine that started up in the early-'80s. (I forget this name and I never kept any back issues of *Faces*, a *Circus*-wannabe.)

Of course, as an actual game doctor, I was also a total fraud. Sure, I knew a lot about the game business, and I intuitively understood the elements that made a game work or falter. But I was no programmer and not even inclined toward the technical. So, whenever I found myself in over my head, I did what real doctors do.

I called in a specialist. And I didn't even have to split the fee.

Basically, I collected a group of friends, people who would know the answer to anything my readers could dream up. My “associates” included Seth Mendelsohn (then with Virgin), Tommy Tallarico (ditto), Russ Lieblich (Activision), and Billy Pigeon (then with Hi-Tech Expressions) – and later, after moving to Vegas in ’89, the gang at Westwood, including Brett Sperry, Lou Castle and Mike Legg.

They were my “consultants”. They gave me the info and I massaged it into the language of the somewhat salty, crusty and cynical Game Doctor.

But other than this small cluster of sources, even friends were unaware of my medical identity. So I didn’t have to fend off questions at parties about *Pong* games burning out the surface of TV screens or what’s inside a videogame “cassette.” And you never get sued for malpractice, even when you’re completely wrong. It was all in anonymity and I loved it!

Then the bell rang, on a Christmas morning in the late-’80s and it all ended.

After attempting to ignore the bell, on the fourth ring I gave up and stumbled to the storm window adjacent to the front door and opened it up, a blast of icy New York air stiffening my nipples and sending goose bumps rippling down my back.

It was one of the neighborhood kids; the ones I occasionally loaned old NES games to.

“Merry Christmas!” he piped up.

“Man, it’s freezing. What do you want?”

“Can you come look at our new computer?”

“I’ve seen computers.”

“But this one is broken.”

“I’ve seen broken computers, too. Merry Christmas.”

“No, no! Don’t go! Maybe you can fix it?”

Here’s a kid, doesn’t even *know* I’m the Game Doctor, and he’s waking me up on a cold morning like I’m a country sawbones and his mom is birthin’ a baby.

“I’ll come by when I wake up,” I promised half-heartedly.

“Pleeeeeeeeaaaaase, Mr. Bill,” he begged me, in that kid-on-Christmas voice that always turns the trick in movies. “We want to play with our computer!”

I smiled and waved at him as I locked down the storm window and returned to sleep.

About 45 minutes later, the doorbell rang again. It was the kid’s old man and he had The Look about his eyes. It’s a look you get after screwing with a VCR or a DVD or (especially) a computer for about two hours and are ready to hurl the machine out into the snow, then fall upon it like a werewolf and rend it into its component parts.

“Please,” was all he said, his voice distorted by frustration, cold and shame. “Please come look at it.”

I may not be a sucker for the Tiny Tims of the world, but I could see this guy was about one crash screen away from blowing his bolts. So I got dressed and accompanied him the block and a half to the family’s typical Queens two-family home. The house smelled of dinner cooking and cookies cooling, a picture perfect domestic holiday greeting card, except for the area directly in front of the TV set.

There, a \*shudder\* Tandy PC sat, covered in wires and plugs and plastic bags and documentation in various languages. A collection of screwdrivers had been unfurled nearby and several males of varying ages sat pretending to work on the machine.

Okay, now at this time, Tandy computers were a weird offshoot of standard IBM PCs. They were PCs but they weren’t. Tandy PCs were purchased by people who were somehow lured into their neighborhood Radio Shack by the notion that they would have guidance should the slightest problem arise. For a while, the Tandy was so popular that when Quantum Link (the Commodore-64 exclusive online service that eventually morphed in AOL) expanded to new systems, it opened both a PC-Link *and* a TandyLink, despite the fact that the Tandy was billed as *being* a PC.

I knelt down in front of the morass of component parts and assembled the thing as best I could. Obviously, it was an MS-DOS machine, so after I booted it, the appearance of that familiar blinking prompt on the monitor assured me that I had actually accomplished my task, hangover and all.

“There you go!” I beamed, and stood up to receive my adulation.

That’s when I saw the wife, down on her knees, whispering to the machine. She then turned to me with a look of abject disappointment. “No, it still doesn’t work!” she wailed.

I blinked, then knelt back down, typed in a few commands and got the expected responses. “See,” I showed them. “It’s working just fine.”

Once again mom shook her head in the negative, arms folded for additional emphasis. “Listen,” she instructed me. Then she once again bent down close to the CPU as if worshipping it and spoke to it yet another time.

“What-is-my-name?” she asked the overmatched Tandy, which was ahead of the game if it booted correctly. I, myself, had no idea who she was talking to. But then she looked at me, triumphantly. “See?” she crowed. “It doesn’t know!”

That’s when I realized that she had been talking to the Tandy!

Eventually overcoming my incredulity - these people’s sole exposure to computer education had clearly been episodes of *Space: 1999* - I slowly explained that computers don’t have ears. I pointed to the keyboard. “See? That’s how you have to communicate with it. You have to type.”

The light seemed to dawn. Lots of “Aaaaah, I get it!” echoing through the room. Mom knelt back down and immediately typed next to the “A” prompt: “What is my name?”

Time stood still. The prompt simply blinked, uncomprehending. Mom tried again: “What is my birthday?”

If the Tandy knew, it wasn’t sharing the information, perhaps as a matter of discretion.

As for me, Dirty Harry once observed, “A man has to know his limitations.” I believe that. So I shrugged, nodded and agreed. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s busted. You still got the receipt?”

“Oh yeah,” the old man assured me. “I didn’t wanna get this piece of crap to begin with.”

“But it’s 48k!” one of the boys whined. “And the NES is only 8k and look what it can do!” This was a common misunderstanding among early gamers who imagined that the 48k Apple IIs and PCs would surely produce over 10-to-20 times the speed and power of a humble videogame system.

But the game system, of course, was dedicated to doing nothing but playing games, so all the memory went into color and speed and sound and animation. A computer, circa the late-’80s, had to handle spread sheets and databases and all sorts of not-game stuff that tended to siphon off a lot of the power. Today, we carry machines in our pockets whose power would cause the top of the line PC of that era to slither away in shame.

I saw where the family was heading and reached into my book of bedside manner. “Yeah, well, I’d just tell them you can’t get the prompt to appear. Take the thing back and buy a couple of Nintendo games for your NES. I don’t think you guys really need a computer anyway.”

This was Game Doctorese for: “Take two aspirins and don’t call me any more.”

I know that in this tech-savvy day and age it may seem implausible that less than two decades ago people expected home computers to have conversations with them, to know things about them. But they did. They saw that machine as a brain in a box, ready to tell it anything they wanted to know. But this event did happen and it cured me forever.

I sure as hell never took another house call.

**THE MONSTERS WILL EAT YOU IF  
YOU DON'T WATCH OUT!**

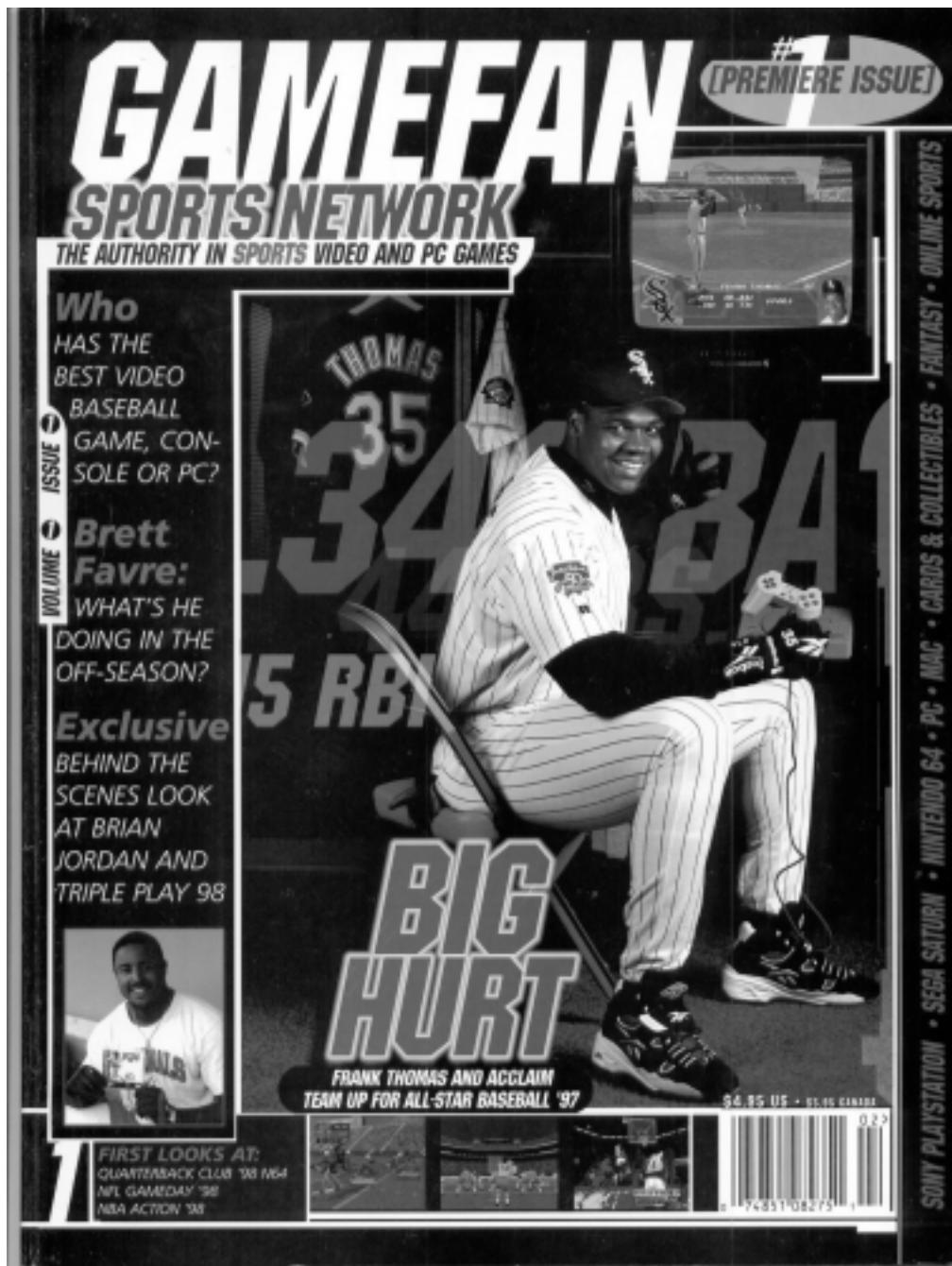
But if you know just when and where to run, you can turn the tables on the terrible foursome and catch yourself a fleet of blue meemies for big points. And here's the guide, written by expert game player Ken Uston, that can show you the tricks and techniques to help you keep PAC-MAN running and scoring through board after board of perils and pitfalls. All it takes is some practice with the game-winning poutines, and soon you'll be ducking, dodging, eating, and scoring with the best of them as you learn all about—

**MASTERING  
PAC-MAN**

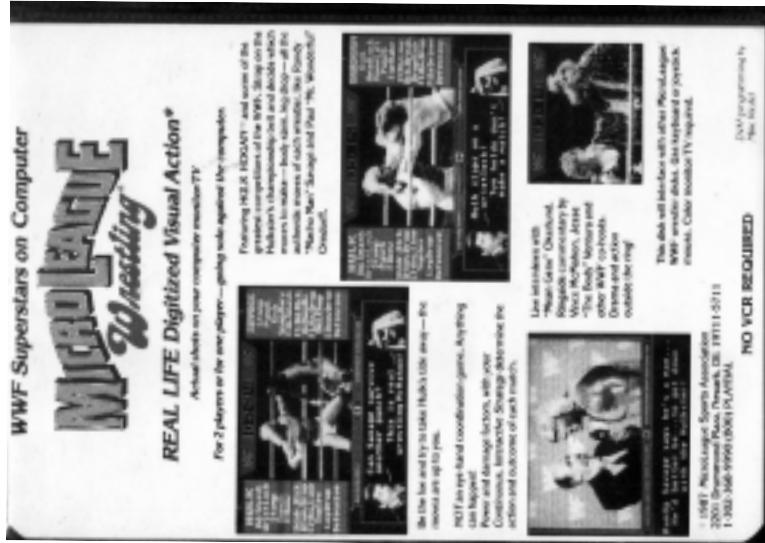
KEN USTON is recognized as the foremost block-junk player in the world. He has appeared numerous times on national television, has been written up in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, and countless other periodicals, and the story of his life is currently being made into a major motion picture. Ken has a B.A. in Economics from Yale (Phi Beta Kappa), an M.B.A. from Harvard, and has taught block-junk around the world. And, as he himself puts it, "Mathematical and logic challenges of all kinds have always been of interest to me, whether it's computer programming, probability, employees, bridges, blackjack, or PAC-MAN."

To Arnie:  
Good luck  
With Your!  
Ken Uston  
January 1982

Ken wishes us good luck with EG on the inside cover of his book. I have Arnie's copy and he has mine. To this day, I'm not altogether sure why.



*The cover of the first (and, so far, only) game magazine devoted exclusively to sports games. Alas, after two issues money problems at Metropolis (which owned DieHard Gamefan at the time) caused its cancellation. I designed the book with a young editor named Rustin Lee and contributed several articles — and Arnie wrote at least one piece for them, for which he has still not been paid.*

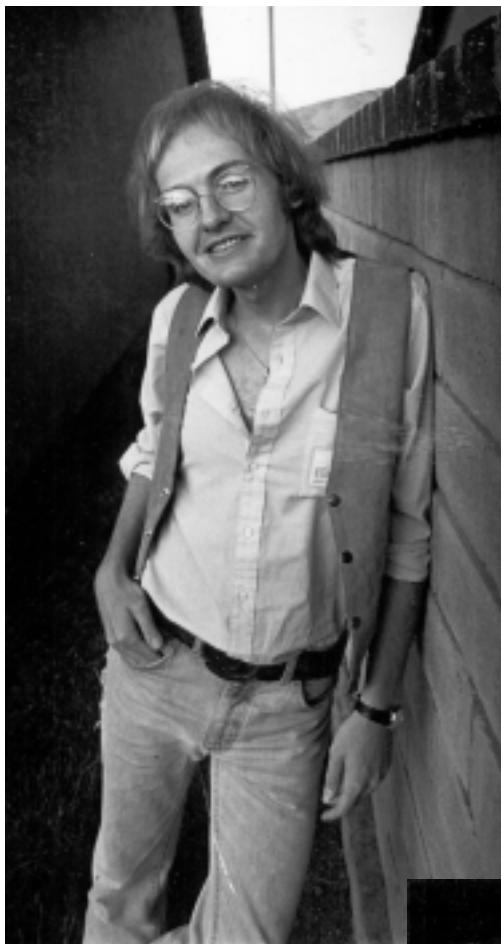


*The back of the box shows how the game played through the use of menus and digitized image displays. This was really ahead of its time, but it didn't hack it on the Commodore 64, just on the ST and Amiga.*

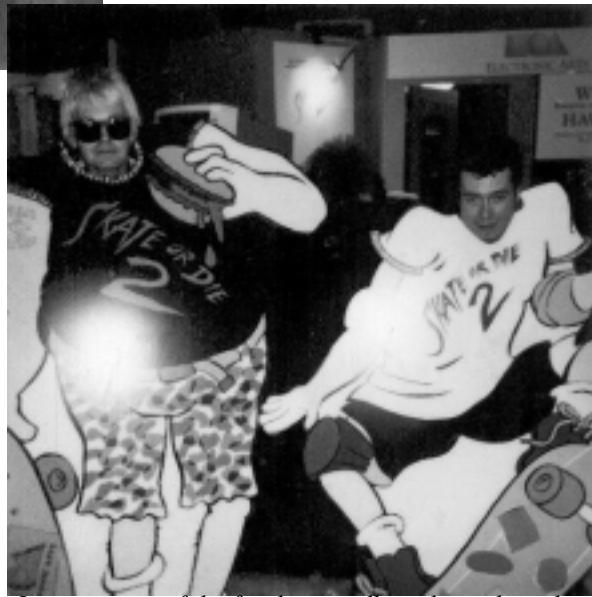


*When Arnie, Joyce and I designed MicroLeague Wrestling (programmed by Mike Riedel), it was not only the first computer wrestling game, it was the first game to use a WWF (now WWE) license on any type of game software. Of course, once it started to sell, they dumped us for Acclaim.*

*Bill Kunkel*



*The author relaxes against a wall prior to the start of the office opening party for EG's West Coast Office.*



*I pose in one of the faceless cardboard standups that infest game-oriented trade shows. This one shows me and veteran programmer Billy Pigeon (right) in action. The is the closest I will ever come to skateboarding, by the way.*



*The leading game journalists of the 90s gather around a biplane as Accolade hypes its Bubsy Bobcat sequel. That's me with my head between the two Accolade PR women.*



*Yet ANOTHER cardboard stand-up I'm sticking my face in! And I never even PLAYED this game!*



*Your author playing with then then-new Atari Lynx. Loved that system.  
My late cat Beatnik (lynx rufus by species) watches with disinterest.*



*I discuss the gaming scene with a pair of  
idiots I met on the exhibit floor. Viacom offered  
to let me take them home, but specified that I  
had to take the couch, TV, etc. as well so I  
passed on that opportunity of a lifetime.*



*CES flips me the bird.*



*My wife Laurie converses with two of my oldest friends.*



*You gotta crush a lot people to get ahead in this business. I keep mine out on the patio.*



*Here I'm testing out the world's largest joystick at the GM plant in Michigan. Brett Sperry (co-founder of Westwood) is on the left, conversing with a mostly obscured Arnie Katz, who suffered terribly while bravely navigating the massive plant.*



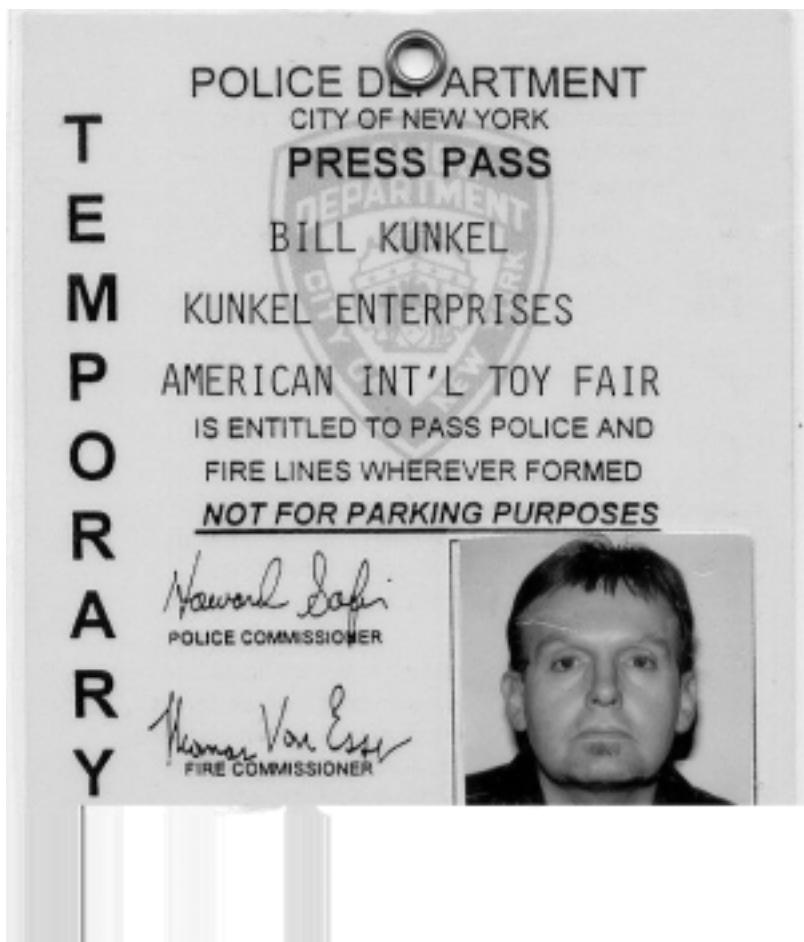
*As I arrived in the airport in Orlando, I was greeted by Jay Simon and a bunch of people in Pac-Man costumes. Jay ran the "Power Play" arcade, the coolest game den I've ever seen. He ran fog machines at closing times, trucked in huge amounts of snow into the parking lot so the Florida kids could touch snow and even arranged to have a hologram of a phoenix projected into the skies above Kissimmee, FL.*



*Joyce and Arnie Katz in all their costumed glory, circa 1990.*



*When a bunch of hardcore fans of the Access golf sim LINKS got together in Vegas, I covered the event for the Access Newsletter. This was the Golf Cake.*



*Although it looks like a Wanted poster, this was my TEMPORARY (could they make those letters any bigger?) Press Pass to the Toy Fair. Technically, I could have also covered crime scenes, but in New York there's never a crime scene when you want one.*



*My most recent media appearance (except for those old interviews they keep running on G4TV) was in the Washington Post. At far left is Steve Wik, designer of the POSTAL 2 series and seated beside him (showing leg) is my old friend Running With Scissors prez Vince Desi. I'm at the far right showing off my new Stone Cold Steve Austin look and to my left is Mike J, Marketing Moyle for Running With Scissors. The other guys were young game designers visiting for the afternoon. Some day they'll write their own book and won't identify me in this picture.*



*Russ Ceccola, AKA RC Cola, was one of the most popular game journalists of the 90s, but he was best known among his contemporaries for his ability to score goodies at game booths and for this disturbing Christmas photo he sent his friends one year.*



*Ever since there has been a Game Doctor, there has been a Game Nurse to, err, assist him. Here's one of the best — Game Nurse Rachael — posing on a giant chessboard just for you.*



*Here's a caricature of the Second City Players in Chicago, circa 1982, which was part of a special show put on for the Magnavox Odyssey. Note the player seated on the right as he was a dead ringer for Arnie Katz and portrayed him in several skits. You can still see the autographs, though they have faded over the years.*

# How Alex Pajitnov was Tetris-ized!

(1987-1994)

## I.

It is, in my opinion, the ultimate second generation electronic game (the first generation being signified by the arrival of *Pong*-type games). In comic book terms, it is the masterpiece of the Silver Age. It is a game so visually and conceptually simple that it can be played on a cell phone with utter visual clarity, yet it would cost millions to reproduce in the real world.

This game provides a deeply satisfying yet ironically ongoing sense of closure and it fits so snugly into my oft-quoted definition of what makes games great I feel compelled to repeat it yet again: it takes a minute to learn, a lifetime to master.

My subject, for those of you who didn't find the chapter title enough of a hint, is *Tetris*, a game so rich in industry impact and insider electronic entertainment history that several books have devoted entire chapters to its back story alone.

In fact, the saga behind *Tetris* would have actually made a great novel - and later, of course, an HBO movie.

Here's the pitch: It's the mid-'80s and Nintendo has had such an incredible success with its Famicom game unit in Japan that it is preparing to rename it the Nintendo Entertainment System and take over the abandoned US videogame market.

Cut to the USSR, where an affable computer functionary (we suggest Robin Williams for the role) at the Moscow Academy of Science's Computer Center named Alex Pajitnov has created a simple but compelling game, inspired by a version of pentominoes he happened to encounter, that runs on a crude Electronica 60 computer. This game really has something. People can't stop playing it. A second programmer soon ports it to the PC and word of this fantastic new computer game begins to pollinate through the Moscow gaming community...and beyond!

The game soon starts attracting opportunists like a magnet collects iron filings. In a race to see who could screw who first, a cast of characters assembled, most of who were in such a hurry to snatch up the rights to this obvious classic that the vaguely-worded contracts produced would subsequently provide a small army of lawyers with an extra two weeks in Bali during the winters to come.

By the summer of '86, a group of Hungarian programmers slam the incredibly simple program into C64 and Apple II+ formats. The game is on

the verge of escaping into public domain. Ah, but these versions are spotted by the somewhat predatory president of an English software house (if I may, Jeremy Irons or Gary Oldman would be perfect), who plans to obtain the game rights as quickly as possible. Alas, before he actually gets around to, oh, say, *meeting* the game's creator, he represents himself as the agent for *Tetris* and deals off most of the rights to an even bigger English game publisher (for this part, I want Bob Hoskins) and its similarly successful US affiliate. They publish the game and it is wildly successful, as both a compelling contest and a gesture of détente (*Tetris* was heavily marketed as the first Iron Curtain-produced electronic game to make it to the West).

The predatory president/agent, meanwhile, somehow scores the rights to publish the game on the PC during summer '87, but he still doesn't have a solid deal with the Russians. In fact, he's having so much trouble wading through the obdurate, bureaucratic waters of the Moscow Academy of Science that he may be thinking of hijacking the game and assigning authorship to the Hungarians!

Meanwhile, back at the Soviet science ranch, sensing that it might have something big here, the Russians stall and our harried agent's designs are torn further asunder when the American media interviews the game's actual creator (Robin Williams, remember!) in response to the buzz that *Tetris* has created in the States.

This goes on and on, with the agent (Irons/Oldman) eventually signing a legit deal to make the game for "home computers." Meanwhile, *Tetris* is getting bigger and bigger, and the big Brit software company that purchased those rights from our agent has, by now, created a sub-licensing tangle of horrific proportions.

As for the Russians, they've transferred the negotiating rights from the Academy of Science to a group of legal specialists and commie bean counters dubbed ELORG.

That's when Nintendo enters the picture. Sensing that *Tetris* is the perfect software vehicle to launch its new Game Boy system, an American trouble-shooter (Leo DiCaprio being a natural for this role) is dispatched to Russia and arrives at almost the same time as both the agent and the president of the British software company (Hoskins) on a sub-licensing binge (by the way, this character is also a major political powerbroker in Great Britain, as if the story needed any additional juice).

But the American troubleshooter (think Leo! If we have to, we'll settle for Matt Damon) reaches the Russians (who had shrewdly retained rights to the hand-held version of *Tetris*) first and not only steals the deal out from under the feet of his competitors, but blows the Russians' minds when he shows them the still-unveiled Famicom. The Russians had never

considered a console TV system when they sold the agent the “home computer” rights.

At this point, the English agent arrives, and the Russians politely but firmly sequester him in a room and offer him a contract in which he specifically agrees, once again, that he is buying the “computer rights” to the game. In the pressure of the moment, the otherwise razor sharp agent never considers that videogame consoles would be a different set of rights. The Russians play him like a Stradivarius, then walk back in and eventually sign the deal of a lifetime with the DiCaprio troubleshooter (on behalf of Nintendo) for the hand-held and console rights to the future phenomenon known as *Tetris*.

The story ends up with the American troubleshooter as the hero (i.e., the Winner). Nintendo, of course, becomes a gigantic success (“*Tetris*-izing” America on its fantastically-successful Americanized Famicom and then using *Tetris* to launch its Game Boy as the most successful handheld game system in history). The agent makes some money off the arcade rights, but is basically disgraced while the British software kingpin threatens to take his political influence all the way to the Kremlin and really shake things up.

Soon thereafter, he dies mysteriously.

And just so you can run some post-movie text, you might add that a whole host of smaller software companies were left holding a wholly unpleasant bag when the bullet-riddled contracts were finally sorted out.

I’m telling you, boys, this story is m-o-n-e-y. (It has also been considerably shorted and modified to fit on TV screens.) If you’d like the complete saga, I recommend you visit <http://www.atarihq.com/tsr/special/tetrislist.html>, which has a version of the story that is, to my mind, more equitable than the reportage that appears in *Game Over*.

## II.

When I met *Tetris*’ creator Alexey Pajitnov, however, all these machinations were already part of the history of electronic gaming. Following the summer ’89 release of Nintendo’s NES version of *Tetris*, the game literally dominated American consciousness. Nintendo’s brilliant marketing had made us imagine every skyline as the bottom of a *Tetris* playfield - we had, indeed, been “*Tetris*-ized”.

It was in Las Vegas, however, at the January 1990 Winter Consumer Electronics Show (WCES) that the game’s creator was flown into the United States to meet the Fourth Estate. Most of the interview time went to the mainstream press, but at the time, Katz, Kunkel and Worley were three of the best-known names in the business and Nintendo graciously invited us to chat with the man behind the biggest phenomenon in electronic gaming since *Pac-Man*.

More than anything, Alexey looked like a victim of severe culture shock. In 1990, the USSR was crumbling. Food shortages were everywhere, and even basic technology rarely worked. Now here they had transported this quiet, rather shy man from a comparative Third World Country not only to the United States, but to a United States entertainment technology industry expo...*being held in Las Vegas!*

“So much food!” was his response when Joyce asked him about his impressions of America. We were sitting in a room which was dominated by a relatively modest buffet - by Vegas standards, anyway - complete with ice-sculpted swan and what looked like about 200 pounds of shrimp on ice. “Is *all* of America like this?” he wondered, his eyes unable to believe the excess he was witnessing.

“Believe me,” Joyce assured him, “nowhere else on the *planet* is like this.”

Alexey soon relaxed, got past the piles of food and we all had a pleasant chat about technology, entertainment and the relative quality of life in the two nations then designated as “the Super-Powers.” He told us he had begun the *Tetris* project as an educational exercise to demonstrate some facet of programming logic to students.

I asked if he had reaped some material benefits as a result of his having created the most successful videogame in the world. He told us he had been given his own home computer - a 286 PC, as I recall - a machine that was already dated by American standards, but were probably still running the Mir space station when it landed in 2001.

It seemed like pitifully little return for the money he had raked in for the Soviet Union - not to mention Nintendo.

I wondered if he had been given a modem with his computer, since the online world was really beginning to open up in America at that time. “What good is a modem?” he asked rhetorically. “In Moscow, you can’t even make a *regular* telephone call!”

We all laughed, but it wasn’t really funny.

I don’t believe I saw Alexey again at the following Summer CES in Chicago. I think it was actually some time later. He was then the major face behind the launch of Bullet Proof Software (which was actually organized by our American Troubleshooter, real name: Henk Rogers), a software company that primarily produced *Tetris*-like games.

But I could hardly believe I was looking at the same man! Gone was the shy, self-effacing cog in the Soviet Science Machine - hell, I thought I was looking at one of the Festrunk Brothers from the *SNL* “Wild & Crazy Guys” skits! The guy had seemingly gone completely American!

But the outfit was mostly a rib as I found Alexey to be the same nice guy

I had met in Las Vegas. And while he had barely seen a pittance from *Tetris*, he was proud of what he'd created and happy to be in the game industry. Rogers helped him create The Tetris Company in the mid-'90s, allowing Alexey to finally collect a small piece of the incredible profits that were generated by the man who helped *Tetris-ize* the world.

*Bill Kunkel*



*Members of the press received an autographed still from the 1924 film "Thief of Bagdad" starring Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Julianne Johnston to promote Jordan Mechner's 90s incarnation of "Prince of Persia".*

# Answered Prayers

(1991)

They say there is an ancient Chinese curse that condemns its victim to attain their heart's desire.

Truman Capote explored a similar subject in his years-in-the-writing final work, *Answered Prayers*. In that book, Capote related the stories of his fabulously famous and wonderfully wealthy friends, all of whom had seen their wildest dreams far surpassed, only to be left empty and miserable by the experience.

We humans are goal-oriented creatures, after all. Most of us grow up wanting to “be” something – a cowboy, a soldier, a ballet dancer, a movie star, a cop or a crook. And even if we wind up as plumbers or businessmen or doctors, there will always be a part of us that yearns, even in retrospect, for that childhood prayer to be answered.

Me, I wanted to be The Batman.

You know who The Batman is, of course (hell, if it weren’t for videogame ads, DC and Marvel would’ve gone out of business by the mid-’90s). They let the “The” part of the Darknight Detective’s name slide for a few decades but Caped Crusader editor and scribe Denny O’Neil fixed all that in the early-’70s when most of the classic DC characters were given long-overdue makeovers. With the aid of artist Neal Adams, and a string of brilliant stories such as “Night of the Reaper” and “The Joker’s Five-Way Revenge,” “Batman” once again became “THE Batman” and would not require further cosmetic surgery until Frank Miller picked up the scalpel almost two decades later.

I hail, however, from an earlier time period. I became a comic book fan around the age of nine, which would have been 1959. You may remember this time period if you ever watch *Leave It to Beaver* or *Happy Days* reruns. It was a time so primitive that Marvel Comics hadn’t even been invented yet and Stan Lee (née Lieber) was writing terrible romance stories and monster comics with titles like *Blarghh! The Thing That Ate With Its Hands!*

As for superheroes, they all lived in mythical, unrealistic-looking urban areas with names like “Metropolis” and “Central City.” And all I knew for absolute certain was that I wished to join their ranks. Even blatantly second-rate super teams commanded my interest (you have to want to wear the mantle of superhero pretty badly to yearn after membership in the “Legion of Substitute Heroes,” the inadvertent inspiration for “Mystery Men” and

dozens of other superhero goofball squads).

But as I enumerated the various difficulties I faced on the road to joining the long underwear crowd, they seemed more formidable than I had first considered. First off, there was that matter of my not having any super power. Forget The Flash – I was closer to the slowest kid in my class than the fastest. Also I couldn't fly, see through women's clothing or even cloud men's minds. The list of superguys upon whom I might model myself grew increasingly thin. It began to look as if the only way I would ever acquire a super power was via one of those inexplicable lab accidents that allow the lucky victim thereafter to burst into flame at will, read minds or see through women's clothes.

But in The Batman, I found a physically normal human being who relied upon his mind as well as his fists to Fight Evil. True, Bruce Wayne had several advantages over me. For one thing, his parents had been brutally gunned down before his terrified teenage eyes, giving him the motivation to lift all those weights and invent all those utility belt weapons. For another, those same dead parents were absurdly wealthy, giving Bruce his very own Stately Manor (complete with Batcave – and I bet *that* was never mentioned in the real estate specs) in which to give birth to his new persona.

Nonetheless, the Caped Crusader was my dawg, as they say. I didn't just *read* his comics; I *studied* them, as if each saga were part of a larger manual on the subject of How to Be the Batman.

Time passed and – let me end the suspense right now – I never did become The Batman. I did, however, become a comic book writer, working at DC (writing Lois Lane, The Private Life of Clark Kent, Vigilante, romance stories, horror stories and Jor-El only knows what all else), Marvel (where I got to script Spider-Man, Captain America, The Falcon, Wonder Man, Dr. Strange and some fill-in stories that may still be sitting in the office files) and Harvey (where I spent a year writing Richie Rich).

But never Batman. There were several near-misses, but even then, all the writers enjoyed scripting Batman because, as a mortal human, he was far more interesting than that invulnerable Boy Scout, Superman (and, for those pre-Wolverine times, Bats was pretty damned psycho, as well). By the time my opportunity at the Cowl would arrive, I was gone from DC, writing the continuity pages for the European editions of Marvel Comics. I had actually begged Denny O'Neil to give me a recommendation for a tryout at Marvel, where a talented and generous man named Archie Goodwin did just that and hired me.

But that's another story. Two years later, I was splitting my time between Richie Rich and writing about electronic games for *Video* magazine. It looked like my shot at Batman was going to be a regret I would carry with me into old age.

Fast-forward to 1989 and *Batman*'s arrival on the big screen. As with any fanboy, I had my gripes with the storyline. Making the Joker the killer of Batman's parents is not only gratuitous; it seems to put closure on Bruce's crimefighting career. Then there was the improbable casting of Michael Keaton and all, but still, it was a pretty good comic book movie.

Word filtered out soon thereafter that a sequel, *Batman Returns* was being planned for release in 1992. Burton at the helm again; bigger budget,



Dear Bill:

5/1/93

Thanks for all your help on the  
Park Place /300 video. Your patience  
& cooperation were very much appreciated.

Sincerely,  
Doctor Dan Hyak  
Doctor - THREE OF A KIND PRODUCTIONS.

Some people actually send you a thank you note after you've flown down to the beach at San Diego to help hype a forthcoming product. If it was Park Place, it was probably a football game; they made about half a dozen of 'em!

the whole sequel trip. Konami picked up the computer game rights and the development job was assigned to Park Place. I knew the people at Park Place very well – it was a hot development group with several hit sports games in its resume. And someone, somewhere, decided that it might be a good idea to bring in actual game designers on this project. My background as a comic book writer helped Subway Software (Arnie Katz, Joyce Worley and me) score the gig.

In fact, this was not even Subway Software's first comic book project. When Arnie, Joyce and I branched out into game design in the mid-'80s, we churned out design documents on a monthly basis for a Brit software firm called Tynesoft. Somehow, Tynesoft acquired the rights to produce a computer game based on Superman (called *Superman, Man of Steel* and later published in the US by Capstone) and again, given my history, I took the lead in creating the design. And while the C64 version is an unplayable mess, I will tell you that the Atari ST and Amiga versions are among the finest design work Subway Software ever produced.

And now I was getting my shot at Batman! At THE Batman! The rest of the process was a marvelous blur, full of contract signings, fat checks, and even a trip to the Hollywood studio where the film was being made. It was during my visit to the vast soundstage that I got to walk across the wintry rooftops of Tim Burton's ultra-noir Gotham City. Of course, this being Hollywood, the rooftops were constructed about a foot-and-a-half off the ground, but still, it just ... looked ... great!

I stood atop a vaulted cathedral ceiling and stared up into the black rigging and raised a silent fist to the stars.

My long-time prayer was being answered – I was going to design the greatest Batman game the world had ever seen! We would take an entirely different approach; let the player *become* the Caped Crusader as never before!

And it didn't even require that my parents be brutally slain before my horrified eyes.

And I guess that's when the super villains started to show up....

The day a copy of the script for *Batman Returns* arrived via Federal Express offered me a remarkable spectrum of emotion. First came the pride; I was getting an advance peek at one of the hottest properties in Hollywood. Then the sense of cool, of being connected to Tim Burton and all that incredible dark winter imagery I had toured back at the Warner Bros. Studio backlot.

Then came the shattering gong of Reality. But I get ahead of myself....

After the script was delivered, I adjourned first to my bedroom, lit up a smoke, and sat back to peruse the written word and contemplate how I would handle its revolutionary transition to the interactive world. Arnie Katz,

Joyce Worley and I had already discussed a general approach to the game design which would run completely counter to the platform-based videogame and handheld versions we expected to glut the market.

At the time, PCs were not really the ideal platform on which to build a twitch game anyway, so we went in different directions. Batman, for example, could return to the Batcave in between trips to Gotham City, where he could select weapons and other tools to stick in his utility belt (a limited number of slots would keep the player from bringing the entire cave with them on each mission). During the mission, the player could simply click on any of these items and they would automatically be brought into play.

We even had a different design idea for the inevitable fight sequences. The plan was to give players a sort of gauge which would allow them to control how hard our superhero fought. This would allow Batman to engage in combat at any level from merely parrying blows to battling full out. Of course, Batman is human, and he can only fight full out for so long. The intention was that players would have to constantly reorient Batman's fighting level based on the immediate threat and the object of the mission.

Park Place had been tremendously cooperative in the early stages and agreed to develop an engine which would position Batman in a typical visual pose at the start of each mission (a rooftop, a church steeple, etc.). From there, using a smart cursor, the player would be able to click on any of numerous available locations and Batman would immediately animate and head for that position as expediently as possible.

It all seemed quite wonderful and fascinating.

And then I read the script.

How can I describe the Lovecraftian sense of horror that engulfed me as I turned the pages of that wretched screenplay? Does it suffice to confess that by the time I reached the scene in which an army of Emperor Penguins launch surface-to-air missiles off their backs that I was weeping openly? Had I merely been the Batman fan of old, this travesty would have boiled my blood. Now, I was a *part* of the disgrace. I would be a ringleader in the betrayal of my childhood hero.

I would design the damn game in order to collect the milestone payments and then I would probably throw myself out a window.

The next few months comprised one of the worst periods of my life. The pressure of designing a state-of-the-art game began to affect my health and I nearly wound up in the hospital, but the design trudged on. In those days, it was not uncommon for designers to be removed from the loop the instant the document was created. That really sucks, since you don't get to see if your ideas worked until a shrink-wrapped copy of the game arrives.

It is, however, occasionally preferable to receiving feedback. Park Place was doing its best, but the company was in serious trouble. It had expanded

far too quickly and attempted to create its own imprint, “Spirit of Discovery” under Konami’s banner. The experiment was a financial disaster. Then the five or so different publishers who had signed licenses with Park Place to produce football games under the impression that each of them was getting the *only* football game showed up at CES and saw a whole *lot* of Park Place gridiron simulations.

So, with the designer sick, the developer in trouble and Konami preparing for ritual suicide, an even worse thing happened – Warner Bros. decided to make ITS “creative contribution” to our accursed project. The game, these Hollywood hacks declared, should contain exclusively scenes from the film. They were especially keen on having a recreation of the “spinning Batmobile” scene added to the game.

If you don’t remember the spinning Batmobile, don’t feel badly. It’s not exactly up there with the final moments of *Casablanca*, the Potemkin Steps sequence or the backseat scene between Rod Steiger and Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. Batman gets into his trademarked vehicle, but finds he is no longer in control of his creation. The Penguin’s minions have monkeyed with it, causing the car to rise up on a massive cylinder and go into a heavy duty spin-dry cycle, with the object being to shake its driver to death.

Batman’s a thinker, right? Cool under pressure, no? So how does he solve this problem while spinning like a nuclear top? Why he punches a hole in the floorboard and yanks loose a couple of wires, causing the car to slow to a stop. Big whoop.

The more maddening problem was how exactly to transfer such a sequence into computer game terms. Even if Park Place could generate the first-person spindizzy effect, it wouldn’t make the *player* dizzy, so that meant resorting to some sort of artificial device, like a countdown clock. The more substantial problem was the scenario’s solution. Anyone who saw the movie, would know they were “supposed” to punch through the floorboard, thereby eliminating any hope of making this a problem-solving element (it’s a GAME, remember?). Worse, there was nothing in our game engine that would have allowed the player to select such an option.

God alone knows how we eventually solved the problem, or even if we solved it. Maybe Warners eventually stopped giving a shit, since it was pretty clear from the “updated” versions of the game that I infrequently received that there wasn’t a lot happening with the game at Park Place.

They were too busy trying to make five different football simulations seem significantly different. Of course the programmers and artists did eventually manage to fill up no fewer than seven 3.5" floppy disks, but by then it was too late. I received a finished copy of the game months after the movie was released to uniform disappointment (it was to be the last time either Burton

or miscast star Michael Keaton would be permitted near the franchise). I even tried to play it. Once. And then I put the disks back in the box and stuck the game on my shelf and walked away from the entire mess.

As time went on and I periodically compiled lists of games I had worked on, I occasionally mentioned *Batman Returns* from Konami among my "credits." And I felt some shame when game fans would tell me how much they enjoyed it because I knew they must be talking about the Genesis or SNES platform SKUs. But I never corrected them. What could I say? Admitting: "No, you must be thinking of the good versions. I did the awful one," was simply farther than I was willing to go in the name of altruism.

After all, I had gotten an answer to my prayer. It isn't my fault that the answer was a cosmic belly laugh.



*It was supposed to be my dream project but wound up a nightmare*

Bill Kunkel



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# My Second Trial

(1991)

Talk about almost blowing a great career before it even got off the ground...*again*.

I had clearly come perilously close to being driven from the business by the suits at Atari Unlimited as a result of my participation in the legendary *K.C. Munchkin/Pac-Man* Trial (see "My First Trial") in the early-'80s. But for whatever reason, Atari, then under the leadership of Michael Moone, was very classy about the whole thing. Moone was a good-looking, albeit somewhat plastic character - at one point I half-suspected that Atari's advanced systems department had slapped him together down in the basement one stormy night. He's also a guy who nobody seems to remember. Oh, you can locate him on Google and confirm his existence, but the next time I hear someone refer to "The Moone Years" at Atari, it'll be the first.

In any case, I did survive, only to do the same damned thing all over again almost a decade later. But first a caveat of sorts: I do want to make clear that the side I took in each of my three expert witness litigations represented the party in whose case I believed. And given the power of the companies whose corporate shoes I was breaking, my sense of rectitude could have proven cold comfort had Atari, Nintendo or Capcom been vindictive - or ballsy - enough to try and bury me. But for whatever reason, the three powerful companies against whom I gave testimony and/or depositions never, so far as I know, ever suggested the possibility of taking revenge on a lone, big-mouthed journalist.

On my second trip through the litigation sausage grinder, therefore, I once again pushed my luck, tempted fate and tugged real hard on Superman's cape by cavalierly volunteering my services to the Lewis Galoob Toy Company at the 1990 Summer CES (SCES) in Chicago.

The Game Genie was Galoob's first entry into the electronic gaming world, but I was familiar with them from all the Toy Fairs I'd attended back in New York City in the '80s. Also, Galoob's arrival in the electronic entertainment field meant that they had to hire some familiar faces, people who had been around the business, and, of course, I knew them.

I remember that '90 summer CES as being a big peripherals show. Mattel's silly Power Glove and Broderbund's inane U-Force joystick were both laying ostrich-sized eggs with the press, the distributors, and the retailers, but it was this item dubbed the Game Genie that virtually

everybody with smarts in the entire industry fixated on as the best of show in the peripherals category.

Nineteen-ninety was late in the life cycle of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), and a significant segment of its users had become frighteningly skilled at playing NES games. At least their growing skill frightened the game producers. This was, after all, the age of the Platform Game. Publishers would acquire a license or create an original intellectual property and then drop these characters into an endless series of similarly-designed playfields comprising horizontally scrolling levels (i.e., platforms), power-ups, enemies and ropes/chutes/ladders, via which the player-character could move from level to level. Dave Crane's *Pitfall!* is acknowledged as the first scrolling platform videogame, but games such as *Space Panic* (Universal), *Miner 2049er* (Bill Hogue) and *Jumpman* (Epyx) had explored the possibilities of platform-style play within a non-scrolling playfield years earlier.

When the NES became a phenomenon in the late-'80s, it was unlike the previous generation of videogames in one very significant area: it eschewed the joystick. No longer was direction the primary component of the games. Direction was assigned to the left thumb and basically limited on-screen movement to up, down, left and right. The right hand, meanwhile, was introduced to the new primary gaming paradigm-button mashing! Suddenly the timing with which a player allowed their character to leap across a pit was much more important than steering that character to a precise jump point.

Shigeru Miyamoto is universally regarded as the game design visionary who endowed platform games with the interface nuances that made the genre so popular for so long. And we can see that the interface provided by the NES was ideal for those purposes. In that sense - although it did not scroll, but rather redrew a new landscape when the character reached the far right of the screen - *Smurf: Rescue in Gargamel's Castle* on the previous generation's Colecovision may have been among the most influential games ever created.

In any case, platform games were everywhere. Sometimes the perspective was slightly isometric but mostly it was plain 2D. And advancements came like a cool breeze in the desert heat - infrequently and with little long term impact. The brute fact could be seen by anyone with eyes: as the '90s dawned, platform games had become a creative plague and a demographic nightmare within the industry.

With these 2D platform games dominating the market to an almost unimaginable degree, players were quick to discover that tricks and techniques mastered in one platform game were often transferable to *all* platform games. These videogame gunslingers would boast how they'd

“conquered” this or that platform game in a couple of hours or less. The developers, in turn, got all macho about their not being able to turn out difficult enough games. So of course they went overboard and began producing videogame contests that even an Arcade Houdini couldn’t stand against.

And if the designers couldn’t find creative ways to make the games harder, that was no problem, they’d just cheat. You see, at the end of each level of a platform game the player-character had to defeat a “Boss” (the biggest, baddest monster on that level) in order to advance to the next platform. And how hard is it to simply jigger the Boss’s hit point parameters to make it virtually unkillable? It takes a second, or maybe two, to change the number of shots required to kill the Boss from “10” to “100”.

As a result, most NES gamers had a closet full of cartridges that they had never even played halfway through because they couldn’t beat the sixth level boss or maneuver through the Acid Bogs of Bowtheria on a wooden raft. Game magazines were filling up with tips and special Easter Egg codes while entire lines of books known as Official Strategy Guides were beginning to generate dollar signs on the spreadsheets of publishers like Ben Dominitz, whose Prima Publishing raked in mega-bucks through the mid-’90s by telling players how to actually complete their games (in minute detail and with an abundance of accompanying playfields and diagrams).

Not only were videogames becoming elitist insofar as only perhaps the top 5% of players were sufficiently skilled to actually experience more than a taste of the program, but the whole idea of gaming as an interactive family experience was being lost. Whereas the early Atari VCS games came with dozens of game variants and a rainbow of skill levels, most NES games from the late-’80s and early-’90s traditionally came in two flavors: Hard As Hell and Fahgettaboutit. The VCS had even offered individual skill settings for each player *on its console*. Nintendo and its vassals, on the other hand, had hard-wired their games to the skill sets of 14-year old males.

So when fathers and sons or brothers and sisters sat down to play the latest platform twitch game during the last years of the NES, it wasn’t even vaguely competitive. Between tapping the tips in the game magazines and scarfing the skinny from his buddies who had already “conquered” the latest hot game, the adolescent or teen male gamer always had the winning edge.

The Game Genie, however, was distinct from the various mind-controllers and glove controllers and virtual steering wheels which, at best, worked well on only one or two game genres. This was a piece of hardware with an infinite upside. By using the Game Genie as a physical interface between the NES and its software, players could change up to three features (three wishes - it’s a genie, remember) in any single game. For

example, players could grant themselves any number of lives, speed up their on-screen surrogate and allow their character to literally fly above any and all obstacles. These modifications were generated by having the player enter a line of code for each of their three selections. These codes appeared in the product's Programming Manual and in an additional Code Book which came with the Game Genie. Subsequently, Galoob intended to (and, in fact, did) produce more of these Code Books as new games were released.

Wonk Alert: For those who care, the Game Genie's secret was its ability to block the value for a single byte of data sent by the software to the NES system's CPU and substitute the new value selected by the gamer. A key element of Galoob's case lay in the fact that the Game Genie did not actually *change* any of the data in the game cartridge; the alterations lasted only until the end of that play session at which point the game defaulted to its original program.

I immediately loved the Game Genie.

I thought about how I would be able to look through an entire game before I reviewed it without badgering the PR people for cheat codes. And I thought about all those half-played games sitting in closets the world over that could be given new life. You see, I've always had this weird belief that if you buy an electronic game, you have the right to see everything that's in that game. If you must cheat to do so, what law are you breaking? The mentality of game developers, however, was not unlike a book publisher expecting consumers to purchase a mystery novel that required the reader to take a test before granting them an access code to unlock the final chapter.

I remember sitting in one of Galoob's meeting rooms at that CES, predicting that they could sell millions of these things through the coming Christmas season. And that's when the Galoob PR people broke the news: "Well, Nintendo hates it. It looks like they're going to file for a preliminary injunction to keep it out of stores this Christmas." This was not good news for Galoob as Christmas '90 looked like the last shot at a big year for any NES produce. As it was, Sega released its Genesis two years before Nintendo finally felt it could risk cutting the legs out from under its iconic NES by shipping the Super Famicom (SNES) to North America.

"So you may not get this out for Christmas?" I asked, getting rather pissed off in the process.

"Not if Nintendo gets its injunction."

It had been almost a decade since I had risked my career by testifying against Atari. But still, I *am* the Eternal Asshole. Not only do I agree to testify but I always wind up testifying against the most powerful force in the industry at the time. No doubt if I were to be hired today as an expert

witness, I would wind up siding against Electronic Arts, Sony or perhaps both. In fact, when Electronic Arts purchased exclusive rights to the NFL recently, I did feel that old twinge again. But that's a story for another time....

In any case, because I am the Eternal Asshole, I never learn. So I opened my yap and declared to the Galoob PR people assembled: "That's outrageous! I've worked as an expert witness before, so if you need anyone to testify against Nintendo in this case, call me."

I accepted their props and back pats with the assurance of someone who figures nobody's going to remember any of this by the time they get home from CES.

Sure they would. I barely had unpacked the various game-related shirts, yo-yos, key chains and other CES gewgaws before the phone was ringing. Rather than pass me directly into the hands of lawyers, however, the folks at Galoob were thoughtful enough to give me the coward's way out. "We really appreciated you volunteering to testify," they said. "But we would certainly understand if you felt unable to do this."

Of course, I took the blue pill and within 24 hours representatives from the law firm of Howard, Rice, Nemerovski, Canady, Robertson & Falk (henceforth known simply as Howard, Rice) were in touch on behalf of Galoob.

This case proved quite different from my other two adventures in Expert Witnessville in that Nintendo had already essentially lost the case before I ever entered a courtroom. In fact, I don't think I ever actually saw a courtroom in this case. I made many trips to Embarcadero Plaza, where the Howard, Rice offices were located and the main event was my deposition with Patricia Thayer of Howard Rice by my side and John Missing, on behalf of Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison, representing Nintendo of America, across the table.

Howard, Rice, you see, had been able to reverse the preliminary injunction which Nintendo of America had used to keep the Game Genie off the shelves the previous Christmas and ultimately won a dismissal of Nintendo's copyright issues altogether. This judgment was later affirmed on appeal.

My role in this case, therefore, was as one of the experts selected by Galoob to help determine the amount of damages Nintendo had cost them through its injunction. Of course, between depositions and such, we overstepped the purely financial issues on more than one occasion.

What follows are excerpts from that deposition, taken November 4, 1991:

Missing: ...I would like to talk about the entire five- or six-year history of KKW; and if it has changed over time and you want to break it down, you

can do that.

A: No. As I say, there are periods when we've emphasized journalism more than the other ends of the business, but the consulting has been pretty steady.

Q: So consulting has consisted of analysis of games, redesign of games, and preparation of instructions for playing of games?

A: Correct.

Q: Anything else?

A: No.

Q: When you say analysis of a beta copy or analysis of a game, what do you mean by that?

A: Again, it's very similar to the process you would undergo in reviewing a game; but rather than orienting it toward the consumer, you're orienting it toward the publisher. So you're telling the publisher there are a certain number of similar games out there, for example, and how their game fits in within that category, how close they are to state of the art in terms of graphics, how well the sound effects work within the context of the game, that sort of material.

Q: Do you provide opinions or analysis with respect to the likely success of a game?

A: Absolutely.

Q: That's part of the analysis stage?

A: It's called market perspective.

Q: So you provide market perspective in connection with your consulting services.

A: That's correct.

Q: What does market perspective consist of?

A: [It] consists of placing this product into the context, in the existing context of the game market.

Q: What aspects of the game do you look at in doing that?

A: Sound, graphics, animation, play value...how skillfully the interface works.

Q: Do you look at price or pricing? Is that something you consider in writing a market perspective?

A: No, generally not. Occasionally we will be specifically asked if this is a

budget product or not, and we will - in that case, we will give our opinion on the project and how much it should be priced at.

Q: I gather from what you've been saying that the consulting services are certainly provided with respect to software?

A: Yes.

Q: Have you provided consulting services with respect to peripherals?

A: We've done some work with joystick manufacturers, but it's been very limited.

Q: And which joystick manufacturers are those?

[At this point we nail down the fact that KKW did some consulting for Wico and another company - it was Suncom, I believe - that I couldn't recall at the time, but that joystick consulting was not exactly our major line of work. Of course, Mr. Missing must have thought this wonderful news since it would seem to indicate that KKW had virtually no experience with regard to peripherals. It was quickly apparent, however, that joysticks and the Game Genie were totally apples and oranges - it was only the fact that both were marketed under the broad term "peripherals" that gave them anything in common. Now we moved on to the Numbers Game portion of the deposition...—Bill]

Q: With respect to how many games or titles of software has KKW rendered consulting services?

A: I have no idea. Many.

Q: More than 30?

A: Many more than.

Q: Less than 500?

A: We can say fewer than 500. [I loved correcting his grammar. - Bill]

Q: I'm trying to get the parameters you're comfortable with.

A: You got them.

Q: Can you narrow it any more than that, or would it require speculation?

A: It would require total speculation.

Q: So KKW has provided consulting services with respect to anywhere from 30 to 500 games over its history?

A: Yes.

Q: Would the games come from game manufacturers or from publishers or any one segment of the industry?

A: Well the publishers and the manufacturers - I mean, I don't understand the distinction.

Q: Who hires you to perform these consulting services with respect to a given game?

A: It could be the developer. It could be the publisher. It depends on who feels that the game needs help.

Q: You can be hired by anybody; obviously, anybody who has a game he wants some help with...is a likely client? [Is he calling me a whore? - Bill]

A: That's correct. [Guess he was. —Bill]

Q: Are you ever hired directly by companies, such as those companies for whose systems you devised games, such as Commodore or Atari or IBM or NEC?

A: Yes.

Q: So those companies have, themselves, hired you as consultants with respect to certain of their game titles? [He does a very good job of casting this mundane information in a sinister light, don't you think? - Bill]

A: Yes.

Q: Is there one company that has hired you more often than others for your consulting services?

A: Well, it's generally more often the publishers who are coming to us, and they're often coming to us with multiple SKUs on the same game. So we may be looking at an IBM version of a game at the same time we're looking at a Nintendo version of a game, and at the same time doing two sets of analyses, as if they were two separate projects.

Q: Has KKW designed any game to play on 16-bit systems? [By "KKW", Mr. Missing actually meant Subway Software, the design branch of KKW. —Bill]

A: Not yet. [I must have had a major brain fart at this point since Subway Software had already designed quite a few 16-bit games by that point. - Bill]

Q: Has KKW perform [sic] consulting services for games intended for play

on 16-bit systems?

A: Yes.

Q: How many?

A: Probably a couple dozen.

Q: And the rest would have been designed for use on 8-bit systems?

A: That's correct, or computers.

Q: So the vast preponderance of the titles on which KKW has provided consulting services have been for use on systems other than 16-bit systems?

A: That's correct.

Q: Has KKW ever performed any consulting services for Lewis Galoob Toys, Inc.? [He's going for the big one here, boys! —Bill]

Ms. Thayer [My Lawyer]: You mean other than in connection with this litigation?

Mr. Missing: Yes, other than providing expert testimony.

Kunkel: No. [Haw-haw. —Bill]

Q: Aside from any expert testimony that KKW or you may be providing for Lewis Galoob Toys, have you or KKW had any professional relationship with Lewis Galoob Toys? [I think he's calling me a hooker again... - Bill]

A: No.

Q: Would that be true of Mr. Katz as well?

A: Absolutely.

Q: And Miss Worley?

A: Yes.

[The deposition went on in this manner for hours, but finally climaxed with the following exchange:]

Q: Let's look at the final opinion, line 25 and 26 of Exhibit 6. [You say] Game Genie will achieve far less market penetration due to it's [sic] exclusion from the market in 1990 and 1991. What do you mean by "market penetration"? [He said "penetration".—Bill]

A: Sales, sales to owners of NES systems. I mean, clearly, if it had gone on sale last Christmas, when the audience was ready to buy it, when the NES was still perceived as a viable, live system, then its market penetration would by now be extremely solid.

Instead, the system is being born under much shakier conditions. It's being sent out into a world where the NES is perceived as a dying system, and people are going to be much less likely to spend money on a peripheral for a dying system than they are for one they perceive as a healthy system.

And whether, in fact...your hypothesis [mentioned previously] is correct or not almost doesn't matter, because the perception will become the reality, and the perception is that 8-bit technology is on the way out. If 16-bit technology is here, then 8-bit technology is old technology, and Americans don't like old technology. You could still sell a lot of systems, but you're selling them so people can buy software that no one is making any money on.

Q: Are you aware of any return or defect data for the Game Genie?

A: No.

Q: Are you familiar with the magazine *Nintendo Power*?

A: Yes, I am.

Q: Do you see that magazine as a competitor of any of the magazines you've worked for?

A: In a sense, it is, yes, though it's [sic] sort of half and half. It's also a promotional device. It's sort of a half newsletter magazine, company magazine, and half editorial publication. It's kind of perceived by the public as an educational publication, but it is in fact a promotional device.

Q: Have you ever published anything in *Nintendo Power*?

A: No.

Ms. Thayer: Have you ever attempted to?

A: No.

Q: To sum up, if I can, because I want to make sure I understand your opinion about the penetration the Game Genie will achieve in fact in 1991 and in the future, you believe it's less now than it would have been, due to the advent of the 16-bit technology and, in part, what you've described at various times as a kind of natural life cycle of technology and games.

A: Yes. Electronic entertainment technology does not live forever. It has a clearly discernable, empirically evident life cycle, just because our society moves at such a rapid pace in terms of technology. There are already 32-bit things in the works. The only thing holding them up is the fear that if a 32-bit system enters the market at this time, every person in America will run screaming into the night.

Q: You said individual products also have a life cycle or life span, and I think you said in the Game Genie it would have been two or three years if it would have been released in 1990; is that correct?

A: Yes, again, linking it to the NES's life cycle.

Q: Do you believe that the Game Genie's life cycle, the two-to-three year life cycle, will be less in light of the injunction, now that it's being released for the first time in 1991 - I'm sorry, the answer to that was yes. [This is the crux of the entire case and he not only answers his own question, but gives an answer that hurts his own case. What a guy - Bill]

Does the life cycle, in your view, of the Game Genie - did it begin at the time of its announcement as opposed to the time of its actual introduction?

A: That's a very interesting question. I think, on the part of the public, the perception is this product was created last year. They read about it last year in all the magazines. They heard about it from all their friends. They talked about it. A year of its life cycle is gone. It's being born as if it had remained in the womb an extra 12 months.

Q: What's the basis for your belief that the public in general was aware of [Game Genie's] existence last year?

A: Just the incredible amount of reaction and interest that all the electronic game magazines drew, that all the companies related that produced Nintendo-related product received.

I think it's quite obvious that anyone who cares at all about what's happening in electronic gaming knew there was a product called a Game Genie and that...it was going to come out, and it didn't. They may not know the details of the litigation, but I believe the majority of game players were aware of its existence.

Q: Is that true of casual players?

A: I believe so.

Q: And what's your basis for your belief that casual players were aware of

it?

A: Word of mouth is very strong in this business. It's stronger than in any other industry with which I am familiar.

So we used to try to calibrate our pass-along readership on *Electronic Games* magazine; and according to the surveys that we got from our readers, the number was so high we never even related it to anyone, because no one would have believed it. The pass-along readership was like ten; ten people were reading it for everyone who was buying it.

It's my belief that still holds true for video game magazines. So if you have a universe of maybe half a million people buying video game magazines and you multiply that by a factor of 10 on pass-along readership, or a kid comes into school and tells his friend, "Did you hear about the Game Genie?" and he tells two friends and they tell two friends, like the [famous '90s shampoo] commercial, every game player, even the casual ones, are hearing about this thing called the Game Genie.

[End of transcript.]

The words continued briefly but, in essence, that was the end of my deposition. And just for the record, Galoob obtained a \$15 million judgment after prevailing on the liability stuff. That was the damages judgment following a second trial to recover their injunction security. This judgment was later affirmed by the Ninth Circuit.

The Game Genie came out and did damn well for itself, even spawning a competitor, the Game Shark. This type of system soon became a staple in the video game world, moving on to higher powered systems and representing perhaps the first major setback to the then mighty Nintendo.

I'm two for two, but because I am the Eternal Asshole, I still had one more battle to fight - and that one was the wildest of them all.

# My Third Trial

(1993-1994)

By 1993, the last thing I was looking for was an expert witness gig facing off against yet another of the most popular and powerful software developers in the business. So of course I wound up working the expert witness deal for tiny Data East against the all-powerful Capcom, whose *Street Fighter II* had ignited a revolution which made 2-D fighting games the dominant genre in the electronic gaming world.

I was working in my home office when a gentleman named Michael Hayes called. He was from the law firm of Fenwick & West, a name even I recognized as a heavyweight player. He told me they were defending Data East, which was being sued by Capcom.

“That figures,” I remember thinking. Capcom’s PR people had always been very good to me, whereas I didn’t know anybody at Data East. And, of course, Data East was a relatively small player compared to Capcom, a company so powerful that it tipped the balance of the 16-bit videogame wars when it made a version of *Street Fighter II* available on Sega’s Genesis after having previously played exclusively with Nintendo.

Michael explained that the games in question were Data East’s *Fighter’s History* and, of course, Capcom’s *Street Fighter II*. As it happened, I had just seen the Data East game at the Kwik-E Mart down the block, so I promised to check it out and get back to him.

About three minutes into playing *Fighter’s History* I figured I didn’t even have to go home. I phoned Michael from a pay phone outside the convenience store. “I’m sorry,” I told him with no small amount of relief. “But if they’re going on ‘look and feel’ I don’t think you’ve got a shot.” “Look and feel” was one of the traditional standards by which copyright infringements were obtained and it’s pretty much what it sounds like: Does the product look and feel the same as a pre-existing product? In this case, there was no question that *Fighter’s History* looked and felt pretty damned much exactly the same as *Street Fighter II* – but only in the sense that, to a non-comic book reader, “all these superheroes look the same.”

“Look and feel’s not the issue,” he assured me. Capcom was basically claiming that all of the “realistic” 2-D fighters from companies such as Data East and SNK were infringements on its own *Street Fighter II*. I put the word “realistic” in quotes because the *Mortal Kombat* games, which were almost as popular as the *Street Fighter II* franchise, were considered exempt from copyright infringement by Capcom.

The reason given by Capcom for Midway's clearance was that the fighters in the *Mortal Kombat* games were "fantasy characters," unlike the real world fighters in its franchise. Of course, hard as I thought about it, I could never recall seeing a real world martial artist levitate into the air, turn themselves upside down, then whirl their legs like helicopter blades in order to rocket across the fighting surface to deliver a knockout blow to an opponent.

The fact was that most of the *Street Fighter* characters were about as realistic as the fighters in a thousand Hong Kong martial arts movies. The so-called "chop socky" film explosion in the '70s following the international success of Bruce Lee was hardly producing tutorials in the execution of legitimate karate, kung fu, judo, etc. Like contemporary neo-classic martial arts films such as *House of Flying Daggers* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, these early films were more fairy tales than gritty unarmed combat films such as the later "Bloodsport" series, which didn't come along until 1988.

I have always believed that the real reason Capcom gave *Mortal Kombat* a bye, however, was its unwillingness to face the legal guns which Midway (owners of the original arcade license) and Acclaim (holders of the home gaming rights) would surely bring to bear in such a case.

There were, of course, other players in the woodpile as well. Several smaller companies in the coin-op business were also making 2-D fighting games like Data East and felt either immediately or imminently threatened by Capcom's attempt to pre-empt the field. Then there was the rumored personal animosity which, at the time, often played a large part in dealings among Japanese companies. And, as it happened, Capcom's Japanese executives were said to be furious over the fact that the *Street Fighter* development team had recently defected to SNK.

But the bottom line was the same as it had been in the Magnavox vs. Atari case – Capcom was trying to lock up a genre. I may be a fool, but I'm a stubborn fool, and the issue of genre plundering always gets my hackles up.

I signed on and immediately went to work, researching the various legal points that would be used in Data East's defense. First, we attacked the idea that the characters in the *Street Fighter* pantheon were original creations which should belong solely to Capcom. A mature Internet would have been a big help, but I did have a rather large library of anime and manga, Japanese animated films and comic books. One by one, the characters that populated *Street Fighter II* were revealed as types rather than archetypes. I recommended the lawyers read the book *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* by Frederik L. Schodt, then the leading English language work on the subject (it also contained a drawing of an old

manga character who looked uncannily like Bison). The lawyers liked the book enough to hire Schodt himself as an expert witness. Capcom's lawyers maintained that specific characters in *Fighter's History* were doppelgangers for *Street Fighter II* combatants, but we were able to dig up a considerable body of evidence to prove that the characters Capcom was claiming as its own creations were in fact icons, plucked from the grab bag of Japanese culture and literature.

Another issue involved the use of play mechanics. Capcom maintained that certain moves in *Fighter's History* duplicated specific fight sequences, known as "combos," in *Street Fighter II*. Now this was an important issue since it implied that Data East was drawing unfair advantage in terms of player familiarity on the back of their game. This was an especially tough nut to crack, in that it was pretty obvious that Data East had probably done just that.

I argued, however, that there was a certain ergonomic logic to these moves that placed them beyond the realm of individual ownership. If, for example, you wish your fighter (who is on the left side of the screen) to execute a forward flip, it only made sense that the button mashing and controller shifting duplicated the motion desired of the surrogate fighter. A forward flip from the left side of the screen should obviously be executed by hitting the directional controller in a rapid left-up-right fashion. A right-up-left sequence would be anti-intuitive and unplayable. The fact that other companies' games were duplicating *Street Fighter II*'s command system mostly demonstrated that it was a sensible system – that and the fact that there were a lot fewer buttons on coin-ops and home games in the early-'90s, thereby limiting the possible number of combination moves.

I think I was an important witness in the *Pac-Man* trial and I probably earned Galoob a few bucks in that litigation. But this trial was my shining hour. I got to participate in numerous skull sessions with the excellent lawyers at Fenwick & West, breaking down the arguments of the Capcom lawyers and offering insights into the game business that very few people could have provided. I was also solid on the stand through several rounds of cross-examination, unlike the poor kid who wrote the How-to-Play strategy guide for *Street Fighter II*. He was Capcom's big expert witness and fatherly Bill Fenwick gutted him like a fish. It was so bad that the Capcom legal posse requested a recess and retreated into a room with the hapless witness in tow.

We speculated on whether he was getting worked over as we ate lunch during the break.

In retrospect, however, all my articulate testimony and straight edge logic almost got shut down before I could deliver it. Apparently the judge had seen the games and, being an elderly gentleman, must have thought the

case was a slam dunk. Indeed, the games must have appeared identical to someone not versed in videogames – they had, after all, appeared almost identical to me at first glance.

His Honor walked into the courtroom with a look on his face that said: “This one is over.” He announced he was prepared to rule immediately and sweat broke out on the faces of the Fenwick & West lawyers. “Mr. Kunkel has been brought here at great expense,” they pleaded, putting me over as the last word in the games business, selling me hard. And I didn’t blame them; I was with KKW when this case came along and they were paying us massive bucks on an hourly basis for research, analysis and testimony.

I wondered if I was going home early, but the judge looked irritated then gave in, allowing that they would hear my testimony. My first appearance was good enough that the judge, to his credit, reconsidered his position. He noted that there were obviously more facets to this case than he had initially realized and so we all sat down to play for several days of testimony and deliberation.

Fenwick & West seemed very well pleased with my performance, but there was one thing about me that scared the hell out of them – I absolutely sucked at 2-D fighting games. To be honest, I pretty much hated them and this period of dominance by the 2-D fighters was tough for me to deal with. The idea that I would practice these elaborate moves for hours was about as exciting to me as watching grass grow.

Somewhere, in their heart of hearts, I know that my lawyers had a terrible fear that, unable to dent my rep as an Expert, the Capcom lawyers would try a desperate gambit.

“You are such an … ‘expert’ at these games, Mr. Kunkel,” they might say, “why don’t you come over here and show us how well you play the game itself, hmmmm?”

Of course, Fenwick & West wasn’t spending its own money – the bucks came from Data East, which was not only fighting for its life, but for the lives of several other companies. Millions were spent solely to produce elaborate split screen animations comparing and contrasting the “original” characters from *Street Fighter II* with the supposed copies in *Fighter’s History*. Every day the trial continued, the billings continued to swell.

So what were a few thousand bucks to teach Bill Kunkel to become a top notch *Street Fighter II* player?

Their solution: bring in a *Street Fighter II* gunslinger to tutor me. He spent two days, somewhere in the neighborhood of a \$5,000 billing, teaching me to play the game at an acceptable level. I was better than he expected, but my lack of combo knowledge appalled my sensei. So hour after hour, a mental meter ticking away in my head, I learned how to execute every character’s special moves. By the end of this grueling training period, I was

good enough that my mentor described me as “not awful anymore.”

Of course, I was never called upon to go anywhere near either of the games in court. Everything went like a dream and, in the end, Capcom’s case was kicked out of court, based on the arguments we had developed. It felt good—and prosperous.

Unfortunately, I guess Fenwick & West may have been a little too liberal in their willingness to spend Data East’s money as that venerable game company basically went out of business shortly thereafter, despite the win.

I think the most ironic thing about the whole deal was the fact that Data East had actually invented the martial arts genre with its ’80s arcade game, *Karate Champ*. When another company (Epyx) copied *Karate Champ* down to the last pixel, Data East sued them.

They lost when the Ninth Circuit Court ruled that all karate games would be more or less the same, just as all baseball, football, basketball and other sports games would inevitably share common characteristics. In fact, it was that very ruling that led Data East to believe it would have no trouble producing a *Street Fighter II* type game, since all 2-D fighting games would be “more or less the same.”

CODA: On the way home, my flight was delayed and I decided to kill some time in the airport arcade. Bursting with about 8 hours worth of personal tutelage at the hands of an absolute friggin’ street fighting beast, I felt like Luke Skywalker after Yoda taught him to levitate the spaceship out of that swamp.

I walked up to the latest *Street Fighter II* incarnation (probably Championship Edition) and plunked down my token on the control board since a young kid was already playing. He offered to go two-player and, of course, he cleaned my expensively-trained clock.

The worst thing was the way he would giggle every time he landed a blow, the little snot. Naturally, he was on my flight and the whole ride back to Vegas from California he would nudge his parents, point at me and crow (“THAT’S the guy I beat at *Street Fighter II*, mom! Dad! Man, I wiped him OUT!”).



*An invitation to a 70s bash at New York's Comics Art Gallery highlighting the work of popular sci-fi/fantasy/comics artist Berni Wrightson.*

# Breaking Up is Hard to Do

(1995)

By 1995, Arnie, Joyce and I had been on the ride of our lives for nearly 20 years. We had transformed our dream of melding vocation and avocation into a reality. We had jump started the field of electronic game journalism, designed and consulted on dozens of video and computer games and hung out at the core of the industry we loved.

We were also reasonably well-paid for our efforts, though we had no ownership position whatsoever in the original *Electronic Games* magazine, something that probably would have made all three of us independently wealthy for the rest of our lives. Still, if we were mere salaried employees, that salary was quite generous, not to mention the fortune in free hardware, software, etc. that was bestowed upon us with apartment-filling regularity by the industry. Finally, with the revival/reinvention of *Electronic Games* by Sendai/Decker in the early '90s, we got a piece of the pie and by 1995 had years since traded up from our cramped apartments in the boroughs of New York to sprawling homes in what soon became the hottest real estate market in the Lower 48 - Las Vegas, Nevada.

My Las Vegas house appreciated so much, in fact, during my first year of ownership that I was able to refinance and pay off a huge settlement that got the Infernal Revenue Service off my back for the first time in years.

Because I lived in a gated community, most of the legendary parties were at Arnie and Joyce's crib, with its spacious, landscaped backyard, Jacuzzi and heated pool. I remember the time we invited our friends from Westwood and our friends from Virgin to a pool party. Super-agent Barry Friedman was also there on that fateful day and, after endless negotiations among the three parties, the end result of that bash saw Barry cut a deal through which Westwood became the key developer at Virgin Interactive for many years and owners Brett Sperry and Lou Castle became independently wealthy.

Not that Laurie and I didn't host a few pretty memorable soirees ourselves. Like the time we were going to get new carpeting in the dining room and invited Brett, Lou, Mike Legg, CoCo, Dwight and the rest of the Westwood Boyz over for a Drop Your Pizza On the Floor Party. The ingredients? Lots of pizza, a soon-to-be-incinerated rug and programmer-level sloppiness.

But I think the best parties were the CES bashes at the Katz's. Once we

arrived in Vegas, we realized that the industry was coming to Our Town every January. So we decided to hold a catered get-together that became one of the traditional events of the era. CEOs and programmers; journalists and mo-cap models gathered in groups throughout the house, dribbling out onto the front lawn and into the Jacuzzi, intently debating the past, present and future of the games business.

Because these parties were held in a real home, rather than the suites and ballrooms the attendees virtually lived in throughout CES, they generated an intimacy that no other party at CES, no matter how swank, could touch. The juxtaposition of people - artists, designers, code crunchers, CEOs, agents, PR people, marketing execs, bean counters, and magazine editors—created a chemistry that literally got you high. (And if that didn't work, you could always count on Joyce's punch to do the trick.)

In fact, KKW Inc. had become so successful by 1995 that it wasn't even KKW Inc. anymore. Back in the late-'80s, Joyce discovered a computer game-loving naval officer named Ed Dille who spent his free time on ship-board playing computer military sims. A natural, he wrote plenty of reviews and articles during our stint as computer game editors on *VideoGames & Computer Entertainment* and later contributed heavily to the '90s incarnation of *Electronic Games*. When we finally got to meet Ed in the flesh, everyone got along great and the relationship soon developed into a place where it was decided that Ed would join the partnership.

Ed, Arnie and Barry Friedman worked out Ed's buy-in deal, which was accomplished over a period of time with Ed making milestone payments to KKW until he attained full partnership.

Imagine that; somebody paying Arnie, Joyce and me for the privilege of working with us. This was an idea that appealed to my pride and my ego, but I must confess that it seemed somehow morally...weird. Perhaps it was this ambivalence that led me to make the decisions I did in the ensuing months.

Dille, for his part, worked like a dog, met his payments (transforming the company into Katz Kunkel Worley & Dille Inc. or simply KKWD) and even uncovered a major new profit source - strategy books. Ed had gotten in tight with Prima Publishing and Ben Dominitz, who was just beginning to populate his mansion with a bevy of expensive and completely ludicrous pink flamingos as a result of the fortune that lay in publishing books that explained how to succeed at the latest platform, RPG, strategy, sports and adventure games.

Strategy books, of course, were nothing new. Arnie and I (along with our original strategy editor, young Frank Tetro) had written a strat guide to Atari VCS games back around 1982 and Ken Uston [see the chapter "People Who Died"] had actually vaulted onto the best seller lists with his treatise on

pattern-based play in *Pac-Man*.

But by the '90s, games had become considerably more sophisticated in terms of the strategy and tactics required to play them successfully. With the advent of macro-level platform games, amazingly detailed flight sims, RPGs and war games, players felt the need for supplementary information bibles on any game in which they became deeply involved.

And it wasn't just strategy, either. "Easter Eggs" (special bonus elements carefully stashed somewhere in the game), "cheat codes" (special instructions, input via the game controller, which granted the player extra weapons and/or power), and detailed maps were often required to do the job correctly.

Of course, these books weren't exactly pushovers to construct.

And sometimes, even when you were writing the "official" strategy guide, the developers balked at handing over information. After all, Prima was only paying the publisher; what was in it for the developers? I remember one night at a trade show when JP Withers and I spent almost two hours getting drunk with one of the developers of a Spider-Man/Venom game for Acclaim, *Maximum Carnage*, in hopes of discovering the last bits of information which had eluded game tester Ken Vance. We were charming, our publisher had paid for the exclusive rights and that developer could not have cared less. No dice. Now testing this game had been a nightmare, and we filled the book with caveats to the effect that the players would find some maneuvers extremely difficult to execute. Then, when the game was finally released, we realized that the beta version of *Maximum Carnage* that the development house had sent us was rigged to run twice as fast as the published version.

Nice, huh?

Then there was the nightmare of screen capture. At the time, there was not a huge market looking to freeze videogame images and save them as graphic files. Computer games were generally not a problem since they often had built-in screen capture capability. But the videogames were pure hell.

Two books I remember especially well were the official guide to Interplay's *Descent* and the distinctly unofficial *Final Fantasy III: Forbidden Game Secrets*.

In *Descent*, veteran game fans may remember, you flew a skimmer-type craft through a massive network of tunnels that resembled nothing so much as the world's largest hamster habitrail, firing at enemies and acquiring power-ups in an interesting spin on the standard First-Person Shooter format. The mapping looked to be a major job, but with the help of the developers we knew we could lick it. Ah, but not so fast. We assumed the developers had detailed macro and micro maps of each level. But in

fact, the development system literally allowed them to build their layouts one section piece at a time. The closest thing they had to a map was the extremely crude, low-res wireframe level graphics which were already available to the game's players.

The question of how to map the game seemed formidable but I eventually took the Gordian Knot approach and decided to hack away at each level until it was completely exposed. To accomplish this, we hired artist Ken Trinter to sketch each and every section piece on all 27 levels as Ken Vance played through them, noting the locations of each exit/entry point, bonus object, etc.

But nothing could equal the experience of writing the strategy guide to *Final Fantasy III*. Prima couldn't do business with *Final Fantasy* publisher Square, but Dominitz was bound and determined to produce a guide anyway, albeit an unofficial one. They also needed it in about a week. I actually laughed when I heard that one. But no, I was assured, they had solved the problem! You see, Square (then Squaresoft) published its games in Japan before they appeared in the US. So Prima had gone out and purchased several Japanese strategy guides from which we could, umm, "borrow" our ideas.

Hey, I'm no saint. But I'm a sinner who can't read Japanese, so the books were going to be something less than helpful unless we could find someone who could. I turned, therefore, to our local university, UNLV (the University of Nevada at Las Vegas) and found a lovely Japanese professor who was literate in both English and Japanese. Her only drawback was the fact that she knew absolutely nothing about games and spoke with a very strong accent.

She would translate the various texts and Ken Vance and I would write it all down as best we could. It was a nightmare. In fact, at the end, like an incompetent mechanic who takes his car apart and reassembles it, only to discover hundreds of "spare parts" still unused, we had page upon page of magical items that didn't seem to appear anywhere in the game, many of which made no sense whatsoever.

One item that was particularly nettlesome was the "rance". They came in several flavors—silver, gold, magic - but what the heck were they? Then one day as Ken and I sat at the desk, attempting to assemble the puzzle pieces, I had a revelation. I laughed for about five minutes, unable to speak. Finally, I was able to communicate the solution to Ken: "It's... hahahahaha... NOT a RANCE...hahahaheehee...it's a...LANCE!" We both literally tumbled to the floor, clutching our stomachs in a helpless fit of glee.

Later, after we composed ourselves, an entire row of puzzling words fell into place like dominoes. The "Randwum" was the "Land Worm," the "Reader" was the "Leader," "Robo" was "Lobo," and, our personal favorite,

“Erika” (Elixir).

This was certainly the worst strategy book I ever helped produced, but fortunately, it was blamed on a pseudonym: “Hayaku Kaku”, which, as I recall, translates into “Really Fast Writers,” “Two Stiffs Completely Faking It,” or something to that effect.

In any case, the strategy books were quickly becoming our major moneymakers. Now at this point, there were actually several KKWD home offices. Ed had employees at his home, I had five regulars and assorted part-timers and then there was Arnie and Joyce’s office.

Now you hear a lot of people talk about how, if they ever make it big, they’ll help out all their friends. Well, once those people actually do score a job from which they could dispense favors, they rarely do. But not Arnie. If you’re his friend, you need a gig and he thinks maybe you can do it, you’re hired. That’s certainly representative of a giving, generous soul. But at some point, I felt that he had crossed the line. We were paying to move people out to Vegas from New York to do minimum wage jobs. And while the Katz home was undoubtedly a great place to work, spending several work hours a day out in the swimming pool probably wasn’t helping productivity.

I was getting a feeling much as I had experienced during the last days at Reese. There, Arnie had not hired friends, but instead tended to arrive late and grab a cab home by two in the afternoon. And when he was in, he would mostly drift from office to office, disrupting whatever work was in progress there. (In his defense, you must remember that we did no game testing and very little writing in the office, where time was taken up by telephone calls, news gathering and the editing of other people’s work.)

It just began to appear as if he were somehow out of control, on an ego trip even bigger than mine. And in 1995, I started getting similar vibes. Arnie’s office was earning the least and yet spent the most. It was pissing me off and I knew Ed had to be fuming. He had, after all, literally paid his dues to become part of this group and here he was, still earning like a machine but watching much of the profits being squandered.

The Phone Call was, in retrospect, inevitable.

Barry Friedman and Ed Dille conference called me to discuss something of vital importance. The gist of the conversation was simple: Ed wanted to leave KKWD and start up a new company using Barry as the rep and his and my offices as the workplaces. By eliminating the expenses from Arnie and Joyce’s office and retaining the Prima contract (neither Arnie nor Joyce had any interest in writing strategy books), we would be in the black from Day One.

Of course, the move made perfect business sense, but it was hardly without its personal overtones. Arnie and Joyce and I had stuck together through a lot of years. We dreamt up the idea of writing a videogame

review column back in '78 (along with my wonderful first wife, Charlene Komar-Storey) and Arnie was the connection, since he had previously worked with *Video Magazine* editor Bruce Apar.

Arnie had always been the driving force, the guy who would walk into a room demanding respect. I was the big-mouthed "kid" (actually only about three years younger than Arnie, but compared to him, people didn't see me as a grown-up). And Joyce had been the solid center around which our molecules of madness rotated.

The only time we had even come close to splitting up was the day Jay fired Arnie and Joyce from the original *Electronic Games* and asked me to remain with the magazine. Arnie and I weren't getting along at the time, but I still quit - thereby eliminating my shot at unemployment insurance - so that the three of us would arrive as a unified force - KKW Inc - at the then-up-coming Winter CES (the show that would basically finish off home videogames for the next two years).

Years later (September of 1989), we had even made the big move to Las Vegas together (with a tremendous amount of help from Barry Friedman) and we were still friends, more than five years later, despite the friction that developed as a result of our business differences.

But Ed and Barry were insistent and I honestly had a difficult time refuting their arguments, given that I had made them so many times myself. Once I hung up the phone on that conversation with my new partners, the machinery went into motion. Ed and Barry scheduled flights into Las Vegas for a company meeting. I went back to being deathly ill and Arnie and Joyce went on as before, never knowing anything was seriously wrong.

It was only by the purest of coincidence that this all-important meeting would take place at the worst possible time.

First, I really was sick as a dog. Between the emotional upset of the business rupture with the Katzes and a stomach-destroying virus that had been kicking my ass for several days prior to Ed's arrival, I wasn't even able to stand and greet him when he arrived at our house.

To add to the chaos, our place was in the midst of having massive murals painted on the walls and doors. Our living room, with its cathedral ceiling, looked and smelled like a set from *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. Moreover, we had a guest staying with us who had nothing to do with any of the madness swirling around him.

But that was nothing compared to the bad timing it represented to the Katzes, who were all but hosting a massive gathering of hundreds of fellow science fiction fans scheduled to begin the following day at the Plaza Hotel-Casino in downtown Las Vegas.

The event is called Corflu and takes place every spring. Unlike many other sci-fi conventions, Corflu's focus isn't on movies, action figures or TV

shows. Not even science fiction novels and short stories. No, Corflu is for fanzine fans, fanzines being the hard copy publications produced by a sect of SF fans whose interests expanded beyond the literature itself and became more focused on personal essays and interplay with fellow fans.

As fanzine publishers themselves, Corflu was the only convention that Arnie and Joyce attended whenever possible and this year it would be held in their own backyard. As a result, most of their attentions and enthusiasm for the previous weeks had been on the upcoming gathering. Ed and Barry, however, having no understanding whatsoever of the Katz's hobby, saw no reason to postpone the inevitable.

Barry arrived the morning after Ed and the three of us made the short, mile-long drive to the Katz home. I staggered through the door, secured a ginger ale and sat down to wait for the fireworks. Surprisingly, however, there were none. Disagreements were laid out, points made, but Arnie is simply not a screamer. He so values his sense of control that I can count on one hand the number of temper tantrums I've seen Arnie throw.

Now, however, there was another factor. He was hurt. Arnie may be insensitive at times to the ill feelings he is creating in those around him, but his skin is not as thick as he would like the world to think.

After several hours of back and forth and a few breaks for sidebars, it came down to two options: either reorder the business along the lines that Barry, Ed, and I wanted, or simply dissolve KKWD Inc. and start our own operations.

We all voted for the second option, mostly, I suspect, out of the sense that the first choice would only delay the second. Why put off the pain; it was decided to cut the cord. Arnie and Joyce continued to work as K&W Inc., while Ed, Barry and I created a company called FOG Studios. "FOG" was an acronym for "Fucking Old Guys" but we didn't feel old, and in the next five years FOG did some impressive things. We helped launch the Attitude Network and transformed HappyPuppy.com from a small demo download site to one of the top five destinations on the Internet (then spent years in court attempting to collect the shares of stock we had been promised by the bean counting bastards). We started a magazine (*PC Ace*), wrote dozens of strategy books, worked with TV and film production companies, even started the Collecting Channel site and the TV show *Treasures in Your Attic*.

In fact, by the time Collecting Channel came along, FOG had expanded to the point where we brought two major talents on board - Arnie and Joyce (Worley) Katz.

On November 19, following the breakup of KKWD that previous spring, I married for the second time and Ms. Laurie Yates became Laurie Kunkel. We were wed on a gorgeous day in an enchanting plant nursery on the

*Bill Kunkel*

outskirts of Vegas (no Elvis impersonators to be seen) complete with gazebo, running water and other outdoor landscaping. Many of our best friends were there - including Brett Sperry and Mr. and Mrs. Louis Castle. Vince Desi was there, as were both sets of our parents. Barry wore a woven Rastafarian suit complete with dreadlocks sewn into the beret and Ed served as Sgt.-at-Arms with military gusto.

My best man was Arnie Katz.



### **"THE SHOW STOPPERS"**

**Disney Software    Capcom    SEGA**  
**June CES 1991**

*From left to right that's me, Joyce and Arnie at an early 90s CES.*

# People Who Died

If you remain in any field for nearly three decades, it is sadly inevitable that you will lose some friends along the way. Sometimes it's as simple as geographic relocation, a job switch or remarriage. Some of my closest friends in the industry have simply fallen out of my life through the course of time and distance.

The upside, of course, is that I can find these folks anytime I want with 10 minutes and a search engine, assuming they joined the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and have a computer and email capability. No, the friends you really lose are the ones who leave and don't come back; the people who die.

At one point I composed a list of the friends I had lost to the grim reaper in my time as the Game Doctor with the intention of writing a short tribute to each one.

Forget it.

The list was too long and far too depressing to even consider writing. So instead, I settled on three people, each from a different branch of the game business. One was a visionary and brilliant designer/programmer who is all but forgotten today. Another was a game publisher and computer game fanatic who loved games even more than he loved making money. And the final member of our trio is a man who enjoyed the swinging life as a celebrity blackjack card counter and then went on to almost single-handedly create the videogame strategy book industry.

Have a seat, and please sign the guest book on your way out.

## DANI BUNTEN (DIED 1998)

When I first met Dani Bunten, she was a guy named Dan Bunten, lead designer for the legendary Ozark Softscape development group. Dan was already a cult superstar at the time with Ozark having developed one of history's most influential computer games, *M.U.L.E.*, the program that invented the concept of multi-player gaming as it has evolved to this day. Later, Ozark would go on to produce a piece of entertainment software that I probably spent more hours playing than any other game in my life – *Seven Cities of Gold*.

*Seven Cities of Gold* cast the player as a Spanish Conquistador, sailing across the Atlantic and docking in the New World. Gamers quickly caught on to the fact that while nothing much was happening in North America, the South and Central regions were bubbling over with adventure, danger and gold. The amazing thing was that the game delivered all these incredibly realistic experiences yet the interface was simple enough that

even I – who is famous for tossing or otherwise losing instruction booklets because I hate reading them – intuitively learned the basics of the game in less than 15 minutes.

Once docked, the playfield altered to allow actual on-screen characters to begin their journey inland. For the first time, AI had been developed which allowed the player's behavior to have both obvious and subtle consequences. You might choose to be a Pizarro-type conquistador, for example, bullying your way through the first, unsuspecting tribes you encounter (once battle was joined, you could defeat the entire village by simply locating and dispatching the chief) and pillaging their gold.

But word travels quickly in this world, and pretty soon your party would find itself *persona non grata* among the Aztecs, Incas and other pre-Columbian tribes it encountered, wearing out its welcome by making such a poor first impression.

If, however, you appeared divine and behaved in a benevolent manner, you could befriend the natives, maybe convert them from a religion involving human sacrifice and even acquire a helpful guide or two who will promise to lead you to the *really* rich tribes.

The sense of actually being there, of having been transported, through a computer, back to the conquest of South America, Central America and Mexico was vivid enough, but the sense of having discovered a new kind of interactive gaming experience opened the eyes of users everywhere, some of whom later became game developers themselves. Undoubtedly, this game represents the genesis of franchises such as *Sid Meier's Civilization*.

But much as I personally adore *Seven Cities of Gold*, which was published in 1987, it was a much earlier game that will cement Dani's name in game history and legend long after more popular titles of the day such as *Lode Runner*, *Impossible Mission*, and *Leisure Suit Larry* are long forgotten.

That game was *M.U.L.E.* and the interaction it offered among the player-prospectors (and their robotic jackasses, "M.U.L.E." being an acronym for Multi-Use Labor Elements) may have been cutthroat, but no throats were literally damaged. The game wasn't about killing or hand-eye mastery; it was a thinking person's program that showed, for the first time, what might be possible in terms of multi-player gaming.

Much as Free Fall Associates' classic *Archon* took chess and transformed it into a new kind of game by taking advantage of the computer's capabilities, the Buntens and Ozark redefined what a multi-player game could be through *M.U.L.E.*. It was no longer a question of hitting a ball back and forth from one player to another, or taking turns in moving board game-like pieces along the same linear path. Multi-player gaming post-*M.U.L.E.*

was suddenly a far richer and more compelling virtual landscape.

How visionary was this game? Will Wright dedicated the best-selling computer game of all time, *The Sims*, to Dani Bunten. And the vast majority of gamers who saw that dedication probably wondered who Dani Bunten might be.

Alas, *M.U.L.E.*'s very nature probably doomed it commercially in that it required users to find at least one other player with whom to game. There wasn't enough AI on a Commodore 64 and an Atari 800 together to allow human players to compete satisfactorily with computer-controlled characters in 1983.

Both of these games were produced for Electronic Arts (as, ironically, was *The Sims*), the hip new software house that had been forged by Trip Hawkins and his sidekick Bing Gordon. Forget Electronic Arts' retro-history that would like you to believe that Larry Probst invented the company as a serious force in the software world with his arrival in 1984. By 1984, console games were dying and computer games were in the ascendancy. Probst did a great job, but it was Trip and Bing who made that company the most respected publisher in computer game software. These guys were really sharp, and Trip could write a business plan like butter.

They also had the kind of ideas for the computer gaming world that Activision had developed in the console environment. The early Electronic Arts games were literally packaged like record albums (you remember, those vinyl things we called "LPs"?), with a foldover cover along with a picture and short biography of the game developers. Ozark Softscape had an especially memorable photo that showed Dan, his brother Bill, Alan Watson and Jim Rushing lounging on a wooden bench in an appropriately rural setting.

With developers like Bill Budge (whose *Pinball Construction Set* not only launched Electronic Arts, but basically granted them the "Construction Set" franchise), Free Fall Associates (John Freeman, Anne Westfall and Paul Reiche) and Ozark Softscape, wrapped up in the coolest packaging on the block, Electronic Arts was on the fast track from Day One. (Eventually the company would eliminate the LP-style packaging format because retailers insisted on stacking games like books and Electronic Arts' minuscule spine didn't give them any face space. So they inevitably went to boxes, just like everybody else.)

But now that I've explained why Dani Bunten is such a seminal figure in the history of gaming – especially modern multi-player gaming – I'm sure you're wondering about that opening line in this section, about how Dani used to be Dan.

So let me tell you a story. It begins with a female game journalist I knew slightly in the early 80s. Let's call her Jasmine, because that is not her name.

Although a fair enough writer and reviewer, Jasmine's dream was to design games. Unfortunately, she couldn't program a straight line in LOGO and in those days, you were not offered a job as a game designer if you weren't also a programmer. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, when Brian Fargo gave Arnie and I the opportunity to design the illustrated text adventure game *Borrowed Time*, which Interplay was developing for Activision around 1985, that represented the first time a non-celebrity, non-programmer was ever given a design gig on a major project.

Jasmine, however, came up with an alternative method of attaining designer status – she would sleep her way there. Jasmine was the type of girl who would look at Roberta Williams' excellent work and dismiss it as something she "got to do" because she was married to Ken Williams, president and founder of Sierra Online.

Jasmine also saw every assignment ever given to someone she knew as the equivalent of snatching food from her mouth. As Arnie used to say, she was the type of person who goes to a fancy restaurant and spends the entire meal ogling the plates of her fellow diners, all of which seemed somehow more desirable to her than her own.

If anyone from the game industry with so much as a liter of juice in the software world visited New York, Jasmine would make it her business to seek him out, date him and take him to bed. Sometime around 1984, Dan Bunten visited the Big Apple and Jasmine was not only star-struck, she was genuinely attracted to the scruffy-looking kid from Arkansas with the thick head of hair and enigmatic smile.

Some time later, I ran into her again and wondered if she had tracked down and hooked up with Dan during his New York stay and, if so, how it went.

"It was terrible," she confessed, near tears. "We went out to dinner and he asked me if we could stop back up in his hotel room because he had something he wanted to show me. I wanted to get to the movies, but I thought maybe he was getting interested and wanted to get straight to it."

It turned out that the two returned to the hotel and Jasmine got comfortable on the bed, while Dan spent an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom. Eventually, she started calling to him, asking if he was all right. But he insisted that everything was fine and that he'd be right out. So, Jasmine sat patiently back down and waited. Eventually, the bathroom door opened and Dan stepped out. I have no idea what Jasmine expected at that moment. She probably thought Dan would emerge in his birthday suit and may even have been considering how most efficiently she could dispense with her own clothing.

But Dan was anything from naked. He was, in fact, in full drag.

"What do you think?" he asked softly.

Jasmine, as we used to say, just totally freaked. With no idea how to respond to this turn of events, she simply grabbed her purse and accessories and fled the room in tears.

Of course, she told the story in hopes of eliciting pity, but the only person I felt bad for was poor Dan, standing there so utterly vulnerable and then being rejected in such a melodramatic fashion.

I must also confess that the story itself astounded me; I've known my share of transvestites and simply never saw that in Dan. God knows we were hardly bosom buddies, but it was a very small industry in those days and everybody pretty much knew everybody else, even if most of the communication came via telephone or the occasional trade show.

In the early 90s, Dan took it all the way and officially became Dani. I'll never forget the first time I saw Dani – I knew the face somehow, yet I couldn't fit it together until she seemed to sense my confusion and came over to greet me. "It's 'Dani' now," she explained and it suddenly all fell into place. But she still wasn't happy. The game business, as is its wont, no longer had any use for an "old school" developer and even an attempt at remaking *M.U.L.E.* for Electronic Arts eventually fell to pieces.

So did Dani. Too many cigarettes had taken their toll and despite making a determined search for a cure on the Internet, Dani Bunten died at the age of 49, one year older than me, in 1998.

Gaming can have a very short memory. It is said that all scientists and creators stand on the shoulders of giants. They could never have accomplished their acclaimed work were it not for the generations who came before and laid the foundation on which their modern counterparts constructed their masterpieces.

Dani was just such a giant; if only she could have been a happier one.

#### DAVE GORDON (Died 1996)

In any form of endeavor, passion is among the key ingredients for success and personal satisfaction. There was a lot of passion running wild in the early 80s; people were passionate about VCRs, laserdisc libraries, big screen TVs, computers, the dawn of the "Infobahn" and, of course, electronic games.

Virtually everyone you met in the industry back then would talk the ears off a brass monkey on their subject of choice, full of hope and expectation for the future. But I don't think I ever met anyone who was more passionate about games and computers than Dave Gordon. All his life, Dave was a driven man, and often a victim of his compulsive enthusiasms.

He first came on the scene as a major figure among the Los Angeles Apple II user groups. User groups were clubs that existed basically to trade, at first, home made games and other software and later, driven by the

so-called Hacker Ethic and just plain greed, became pirate dens, driving entire companies out of business and draining the young software industry of millions.

Dave was frequently at the center of that storm because if there was something cool he'd found on a computer, he wanted everybody to see it. There's even a story (confirmed by John T. Draper, AKA the legendary "Captain Crunch") that Dave was the victim of a pie-hit (it was, needless to say, an apple pie) by Apple programmer Chris Espanosa when the latter became convinced that Dave had "borrowed" the latest Apple monitor ROM and converted it to a floppy disk (the old school 5.25" babies). Worse still, Dave was apparently making no effort to hide his "accomplishment".

I first met Dave Gordon right after he jump started the computer game publishing house Datamost. But by that time, he was already known as the guy who had founded Programma, among the first (if not the first) commercial software publisher(s). Dave had one overriding goal with Programma – he wanted to publish games. As a result, in a typical burst of optimism, he went on a buying spree, acquiring every piece of entertainment software that struck his fancy.

According to veteran computer writer David Ahl, the result of this typical first-rush-of-adrenaline approach left Programma caught in a cash flow crunch that saw them forced to sell out to the more formal Hayden. Dave continued on at Programma, but it was pretty obvious from the first that he would chafe greatly under Hayden's bit. There were probably office pools on how long he'd stay.

True to form, within six months Dave Gordon walked on his contract with Hayden and founded his very own computer game software company, Datamost. And once again Dave rushed to flood the market with games, as well as books, an interesting and visionary sideline. But it was always too much, too soon and as Ahl notes "in 1982, Datamost had more games on the market than anyone else, but in '83, they pulled more games than they introduced."

The first time I made a trip to Datamost in person, Dave Gordon was positively ebullient. His arms wide in welcome he was so happy to see The Press in his office that he seemed to lose his focus. As usual, he had a bunch of games to show me, but the emphasis of my piece was the stuff which would be coming out soonest; the finished stuff, while there would be brief teasers on the games farther down the pipeline. So Dave began the dog and pony show and let me assure you that he was quite good at these demos, probably because he never bought a game he didn't truly love.

He was just kind of... fickle.

I was playing a completed game, in the box and set to ship within the next month. I remember being pretty impressed. "This is good, Dave," I told

him, and I never blew smoke when it came to giving a publisher my opinion of their games.

But, to my utter astonishment, he sort of waved me off! “Yeah, yeah,” he reluctantly agreed, “it’s okay.” Then he would look around – he’s the president of the damned company and he’s looking around to make sure that none of the programmers see him – and whispers conspiratorially: “But you’ve GOT to see some of the stuff we’re working on!”

Then came a parade of games ranging from beta to barely alpha. At the end of the presentation I remember thinking that I was sure glad I’d taken notes, because the only game I could actually recall was an Indiana Jones-type action contest.

In short, Dave was always far more excited about the next project than he was about the current one. Even there, he was a typical gamer. But you could never forget the guy. He eventually became pretty outrageous and developed a fondness for freebasing cocaine that would not have been healthy for a man half his weight. His health suffered.

He always seemed to make it to the two CES events every year, though, working for somebody or other, and you always walked away from him feeling pumped up, excited about the business we were in. And at the shows after Datamost closed, you wished that Dave Gordon were running a booth somewhere at that show.

In fact, it was at the Winter 1983 CES that Dave Gordon became a CES legend.

Exhibit space at the shows was priced to coincide with the desirability of the location and at that CES, Broderbund had acquired what was perceived as the sweetest space on the lower floor – right at the foot of the down escalator. Datamost, on the other hand, had the location running along the right side of the escalator; the kind of spot an attendee can go an entire show without catching. You don’t see it on the way down, because you’re staring straight ahead and you don’t see it on your way back up because it’s blocked by the escalator.

But Dave would not be defeated! He had already made an alliance with Captain Sticky and... what’s that? You mean you don’t know who Captain Sticky was?

Imagine, if you will, Harry Potter’s Hagrid dressed up like a Knight of Columbus, complete with a red velvet cape and accompanied, whenever possible, by several super babes. He was The Simpsons’ Comic Book Guy with a gift for self promotion. Now there was a kind of early reality show that was very popular on TV in the early 80s called *Real People*. The idea was that the producers would find ordinary everyday people who were, of course, anything but and then show us mini-documentaries about their extraordinary “real” lives.

The show uncovered several characters that proved popular enough to make repeat appearances and the most popular, by far, was the well-fed “super hero” dubbed Captain Sticky. This living send-up of a comic book hero rode around delivering food to shut-ins and fighting crime at the wheel of his Stickymobile, a car outfitted to shoot marshmallow-like projectiles at evil-doers. He was just whacked enough and likeable enough to fit the show’s ethic as if he were cut from whole cloth.

The Captain once visited the *Electronic Games* office down on Park Avenue South and he was sufficiently famous that as we all headed around the corner to have lunch at Goldberg’s Chicago-Style Pizza, car horns honked and people screamed and waved from buses in pandemonium at our passing troop.

When the occasion called for it, the Captain would hire a bunch of nudie models he dubbed the “Stickettes” to play his crime-fighting, bodice-busting sidekicks. It was the Captain and a small army of these Stickettes who stole the show from Broderbund that year at CES when Dave Gordon hired them to circulate through his booth the entire show. And in a business that was at least 80% male, there was rarely a head that did not swivel to the right on that ride down the escalator.

Once the men – and most of the women – caught site of the Stickettes and the prominent torso of the Captain, undulating through aisles of Datamost games, they couldn’t have told you that Broderbund was in the building.

At that same show, Dave rented a half-track from the Army that he rode around in prior to his big bash at the Playboy Mansion.

Man, you got to love a guy like that.

In the mid-90s, I was working with FOG Studios at HappyPuppy.com in a gig that turned into a multi-year lawsuit. In any case, I got a call one day and it was mentioned in passing that Dave was in the hospital. In the ensuing days, the reports continued and sounded grimmer by the day. So I wrote an open letter to Dave in the hopes that he would read it or at least hear about it. In it, I told him how much he meant to everybody and how we didn’t want to go to any more shows and not see his smiling face.

I never did find out if the story reached him, as he died a very short time later. And with his passing, a large segment of the people who started this industry lost their smile.

#### KEN USTON (Died 1987)

When you live in Las Vegas, as I have for the past 15 years, you come to realize that as a general rule, unless you are talking to some kid who sits in an Internet Café playing LAN games every weekend, the term “gaming” does not refer to playing video or computer games.

It refers to gambling.

In that sense, Ken Uston was a star in two different fields of gaming. By the time I met him at one of the CES parties, he was already the most famous card counter in the world. Card counting is a methodology used in playing blackjack that tips the odds in favor of the player. By keeping track of the number of face cards and low number cards exposed on the table, card counters know whether to bet high or stay safe.

Ken didn't invent card counting – that was accomplished as part of an academic experiment and later proven in the casinos by Ed Thorp, whose book, *Beat the Dealer* became the card counter's bible. But Ken was, owing largely to his flamboyant lifestyle (I mean, the guy attended the famous Activision "Rumble in the Jungle/*Pitfall*" party with a monkey on his shoulder!) the world's most *famous* card counter.

Card counting is quite distinct from cheating and it is not even illegal. The fact of the matter is that casinos here frequently advertise that their blackjack games are conducted with only one deck (increasing the number of decks makes it more difficult to keep the count in your head). But the casinos only want to lure amateur card counters, people who've read a book and are primed to be fleeced; guys who can legitimately beat them are put in the "book" which is circulated in every casino from Monte Carlo to Seminole Casinos in the Florida swamps.

Ken, however, was defiant. For one thing, he made no attempt to maintain a low profile, clad in white leisure suits with long, curly hair and a full beard, you could see him coming a mile away. He felt, quite rightly, that if he could play the game better than the casino, the casino had no right to bar him from playing. He took the casinos to court and won, but that victory meant very little once Ken hit the casino floor.

This was Nevada in the 70s and Organized Crime still ran a lot of the gambling operations in Reno, Lake Tahoe and Vegas. This led to Ken getting a serious "tune-up" in a casino parking lot from the boys with the bent noses.

He was done in Nevada, but then a most unlikely thing happened – Atlantic City not only legalized gambling, its straight arrow gambling commission was permitting card counters to play there unmolested. As a result, Atlantic City became an immediate magnet for every card counter in the world, some of whom were hurting the new casinos badly.

Eventually, of course, Atlantic City decided, just as Nevada had, that if you were too good at blackjack, you couldn't play. And Ken Uston, a guy who had grown up as square as a box, was enjoying his new life as a wild swinger and the cult celebrity that came with it too much to give it up.

Then, one day, Ken saw a kid playing *Pac-Man*. His game-player's mind immediately saw that the kid was running specific patterns which allowed him to move from level to level with astonishing ease. They struck up a

conversation and Ken had soon enlisted a small group of expert *Pac-Man* players in order to get it all down on paper. The book that resulted, *Mastering Pac-Man* was only 128 pages, consisting mostly of the pattern diagrams for various levels, but it sold like crazy, making the best seller lists and opening up the market to the genre of game strategy books.

Unfortunately, Ken felt he had been screwed on the book deal and demanded big money for subsequent books, including *Ken Uston's Home Video '83* and *Score! Beating the Top 16 Videogames*, none of which were big sellers.

He did get to star in his own videogame – Colecovision's *Ken Uston's Blackjack & Poker* – but the clock was winding down for Ken. The last time I saw him, he was thin as a rail, wasted looking and infinitely sad. He had signed on to write a semi-ridiculous series of books (including, believe it or not, *Ken Uston's Illustrated Guide to the Kaypro*) where it was my perception that he was primarily being used as a front.

When people started getting thin and sickly-looking in the late 80s, the inevitable whispers of "AIDS!" were bound to be heard, and Ken's Live Fast lifestyle certainly made him seem a likely candidate.

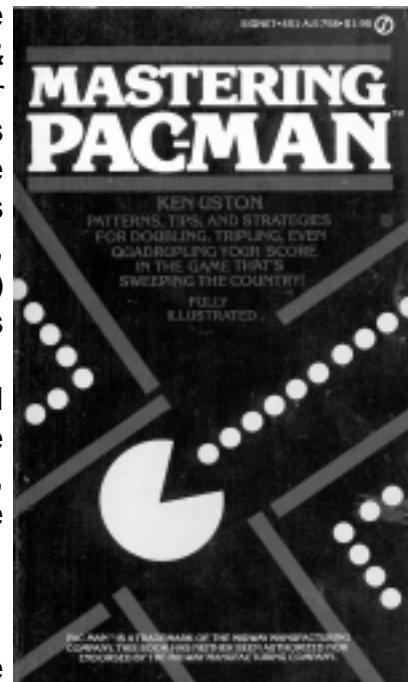
He died at the age of 52 in Paris.

Where else?

Ken was a square who got to be celebrity hipster by having a visionary mind for playing games. He lived the life he wanted and made no apologies for any of it. I still have Arnie's copy of *Mastering Pac-Man* (he has mine; don't ask) with the message from Ken: "Good luck with your magazine! –Ken Uston, Jan. 1982".

And that's it, just three of the many people who left the party too early. But each of them made enormous contributions to the field. For them, it may never be "Game Over" as their ideas continue to influence the world of electronic games.

Rest in peace, folks.



*The book that started the strategy bandwagon rolling big time. Blackjack card counting legend Ken Uston found another game to exploit after being kicked out of every casino in the world.*

## Famous Faces

(1982-1998)

By 1982, we had done enough TV shows (Arnie even did *The Today Show* with Steve Wright of Atari), radio interviews, etc. to qualify as low-level, 15-minutes-of-fame celebrities. In fact, that status was certified one afternoon, rather early on, while Arnie and I were eating lunch in a mid-town diner. It wasn't long before somebody whispered: "That's Andy Warhol over there – at that table!"

Then, unexpectedly, Andy waved at us. I figured he must wave at anyone who appears to recognize him, but he actually stood up and strolled over to our table where he professed himself to be a big fan of *Electronic Games* (obviously, he did not feel the need to introduce himself). I don't even know how he knew who we were, but he had an entourage around him that must have kept him up to date on everything that was happening in the entire pop cultural world, especially in Manhattan.

A lot of the celebrity meetings were, of course, brief, at CES and E<sup>3</sup> events where a company was using a name spokesperson, from astronaut Scott Carpenter (one of the nicest spokespeople we ever met) to Andre the Giant (who, because of his acromegaly, the disease that had made him a giant, was always in pain or roaring drunk and sat mostly sullen and silent at these signings).

Of course, if the company hiring the famous person knew that we especially wanted to meet their paid-for celebrity, we didn't get the standard autographed glossy treatment that the rest of the show had to wait in line for.

Speaking of standing in lines reminds me of the time some software company hired Sting (the then-WCW pro wrestler) to front for a wrestling videogame. For the edification of non-wrestling fans, this guy looked like Tab Hunter in the '50s, except with spiked hair, face paint and a sequined



*My Signing with Andre. The late Andre the Giant and I rehearse a ventriloquist act together.*

ring jacket that could have come from a Neverland garage sale following the *Thriller* era.

The company had promised me a Polaroid and a few minutes to chat with the wrestler (real name: Steve Borden), knowing my background in wrestling, so I periodically returned to the booth throughout the day to check out the status of the line. No sense bugging them when they had a long queue of fans stacked up.

But every time I went there to check, I encountered the same phenomenon. People on line, as they got closer to Sting, would turn to one another looking totally befuddled. "THAT'S Sting?" they'd ask, expecting the former bass player for The Police rather than the wrestler with the face paint.

"My God, what happened to him?" they'd ask in horror, wondering why the famous singer was now suddenly painting his face and dressing in gay military gear.



*A lot of people on the long line were expecting Sting the Singer, not Sting the Wrestler. Surprise!*

So let's see, we met Bill Cosby, who behaved in a genuinely unpleasant manner. And I have to believe that if you're unpleasant when people are paying you good money exclusively for your pleasant presence, you must be a real hard case.

Dr. Timothy Leary was much nicer, though his Electronic Arts game, *Mind Mirror*, was not exactly the window to perception he had hoped it might be.

Sugar Ray Leonard was the coolest guy. When I interviewed him, he told me that when he was in training he always took his game system and a bunch of cartridges with him to keep from getting bored. That was the first time I spoke to a celebrity who actually admitted to playing games.

When I asked Mickey Mantle what he missed the most about baseball, he was straight as a yardstick: "The fame, son. The fame," he responded without a second thought. As if he wasn't still famous, I thought, but then I got the distinct feeling that the Mickey of the 1950s and '60s would not have been greeting people at CES.

Wayne Gretzky was so nice and down-to-earth it was unbelievable. Every time you see the guy on TV, the greatest hockey player in history, you think: he seems like such a goodie two-skates, he must be a really arrogant bastard in person. And he was, in fact, just the most humble, mild-mannered guy.

I actually got to be friends with Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan, better known as The Turtles (*Happy Together*) and later Flo & Eddie. They still play Vegas occasionally and I always intend to go see them, but I never make it, somehow.

Once, while I was snoozing at CES doing booth duty for Reese, the legendary keyboardist Al Kooper came up and asked if I was Bill Kunkel, then told me how much he liked reading *Electronic Games*. I told him how much I dug his work with Dylan. "Cool, we're even," he said.



*When I asked Mickey Mantle what he missed most about baseball, he was straight-up: "The fame, son, the fame."*

Sometimes, we didn't even have to go anywhere to meet the celebrities. Sometimes they came right to our office. That's how it happened with Jaron Lanier, generally credited as the "inventor" of Virtual Reality.

Of course, VR quickly came to mean many things. I teach a course in game design at UNLV and the last time I checked, I believe there were at least a dozen different things that qualified as Virtual Reality. In fact, one of the questions the Game Doctor is asked most frequently these days is: whatever happened to VR?

I think much of the blame goes to ludicrously uninformed presentation by the media. The worst offender was a really bad TV mini-series called *Wild Palms* from Oliver Stone in which people donned a pair of VR granny-style sunglasses and were transported instantly to another world, where the crippled could walk and dance in gigantic Renaissance ballrooms while still seated in their wheelchairs. This kind of presentation created expectations regarding VR that the "reality" of the tech couldn't even make an appointment to meet.

I have also been told, in confidence, that there is another issue, at least when it comes to the type of immersive VR in which the user dons a helmet and gloves which are hard-wired into whatever system they're playing and has an experience in a computer-generated world.

Now I happen to believe that people have an inherent dislike of being tethered, tied down to a computer or console system and, as a result, I had often wondered why we weren't seeing non-tethered VR set-ups. But as one VR company explained to me, the insurance companies were getting nervous over the idea of non-tethered VR units, fearing that they might be so immersive that the user might forget where they were in the "real" world, start strolling around and then fall down a flight of stairs.

Of course, whatever the form, Jaron didn't really "invent" VR; he merely coined the term as part of the groundbreaking work he was doing in computer graphics and interactive visual displays. He has often explained in interviews that the term "virtual worlds" was originally coined by an art philosopher named Suzanne Langer back in the '50s (talk about a visionary!). It was later adopted by the man Lanier calls "the father of computer graphics"—Ivan Sutherland.

Lanier says he merely used the term to distinguish his particular work from those others and it wound up being the phrase that lodged in the public's brain.

In any case, what Jaron showed us that day in our office was quite different from what we commonly think of as Virtual Reality today.

He had me sit down on a chair, and then set up a rig that included a computer wired to a video camera. Although there was nothing in front of

me in the “real” world, when I looked at the monitor I saw myself sitting behind a large set of drums.

“Play them,” Jaron urged.

I reached out and struck the skin, or surface of a drum, using the computer’s monitor image as a guide, and damn if it didn’t sound exactly like a snare drum. I hit it again. Same effect. Then I hit a virtual cymbal and it crashed just the way it was supposed to. I seem to recall other instruments being introduced as well.

It was, as Mr. Spock would say, fascinating.

You know, in retrospect, I’m not even entirely sure why Jaron visited us that day. He was certainly an unusual sight, garbed in his caftan and sandals, his hair a tangle of kinks and curls. He was also obviously a genius who enjoyed amazing people with the things he could create using computers.

It was like a visitor from another dimension had just stopped by to show us the cool stuff he was working on.

Best. Visit. Ever.

The coolest on-location visit I ever made occurred soon after my old friend Seth Mendelsohn was hired to help start up special effects master Richard Edlund’s short-lived video and computer game shop, Boss Game Studios.

As my taxi drove up to the address, Boss Studios (which also housed the new game division) looked more like a junkyard than a state of the art sfx house, but once I walked through the door, I realized I was in a genuine wonderland for a horror film freak such as myself.

Edlund’s credits are impressive, indeed, including work on the *Star Wars* films, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Poltergeist*, the original *Battlestar Galactica*, *Ghostbusters* (a statue of the Sta-Puff Marshmallow Man welcomed visitors into the lobby) and *Species*.

I walked through the massive storage sections and everywhere my eye fell, something marvelous filled it. Up there, the Cryptkeeper’s mansion from HBO’s *Tales from the Crypt*. Over there a miniature of the helicopter hoisting a tiny Sly Stallone from *Cliffhanger* (Stallone, it seems, is terrified of heights and never went near an actual ledge during the entire filming). And finally, perhaps most impressive of all, I stood face to face with the full-sized animatronic female alien from *Species*.

When a prankster turned her on and the formerly inanimate statue suddenly raised a claw at me, snarling, I almost crapped myself, but in a good way.

I think the memory from this visit that remains strongest with me, however, was a short walk we took through an office literally overflowing with

H.R. Giger's sketches for the *Species* creature. As a Giger maniac (he was the designer, among many other things, of the first *Alien* and runs this incredible bar in my favorite city, Amsterdam), the compulsion to grab just *one* of those pages and stash it in my bag was nearly overwhelming. I had never stolen anything from a game studio in my entire life, but that time, boy, that was certainly The Test.

As cut scenes gained importance during the '90s, it became quite common to be invited to the shoots where the big stars would show up. I recall, in particular, an invitation from Virgin to come to LA and watch them shoot Stallone's green screen cinematic interludes for the company's 3DO version of the *Demolition Man* game.

Stallone was shockingly short and not much inclined to interact with a lone game journalist, so I spent over an hour hearing stories from Sly's stunt man double. Now *that* was one interesting dude.

These shoots were run with the utmost professionalism. They even brought along the person in charge of the weaponry who stocked a side table with her all the prop guns and futuristic rifles they had produced for the film.

Arnie, Joyce and I once were guests of the legendary game creator, Lord British.

This was back when he lived in Austin, was still running Origin and had created the most incredible house I've ever been a guest in. Designed on computer entirely by untrained architect Richard "Lord British" Garriott himself, it featured hidden doorways, secret rooms and a mezzanine that could only be accessed (coming or going) by way of a disguised door (or a 20 foot leap onto the hardwood flooring below).

The only way you could spring that door from the mezzanine was by manipulating several of the curios, weapons, navigational tools and other objects that decorated a display shelf ringing its perimeter. The specific objects in question were metal and therefore moved hidden magnetic locks built into the shelving that sent the door sliding open.

The son of an astronaut, Richard claimed to have read only two books in his entire life, a fact he revealed with a disturbing amount of pride, as if he were post-literate. Maybe he was. He was also a software genius, whose *Ultima* games form one of the most successful franchises in the history of electronic gaming.

In the late-'80s, Richard and the folks at his software company, Origin, started up a bi-annual Halloween tradition that is still remembered well beyond the Austin City limits.

Using their vast collection of skills, the group would transform Richard's

house of secret walkways and trap doors into a state-of-the-art haunted house. On Halloween night, Richard would greet (with the ominous message: "Your time has come!") and personally escort the many guests through his marvelous, mazelike dwelling.

Alas, the event proved too successful, and when all of Austin and the surrounding areas began showing up, the tradition was reluctantly retired.

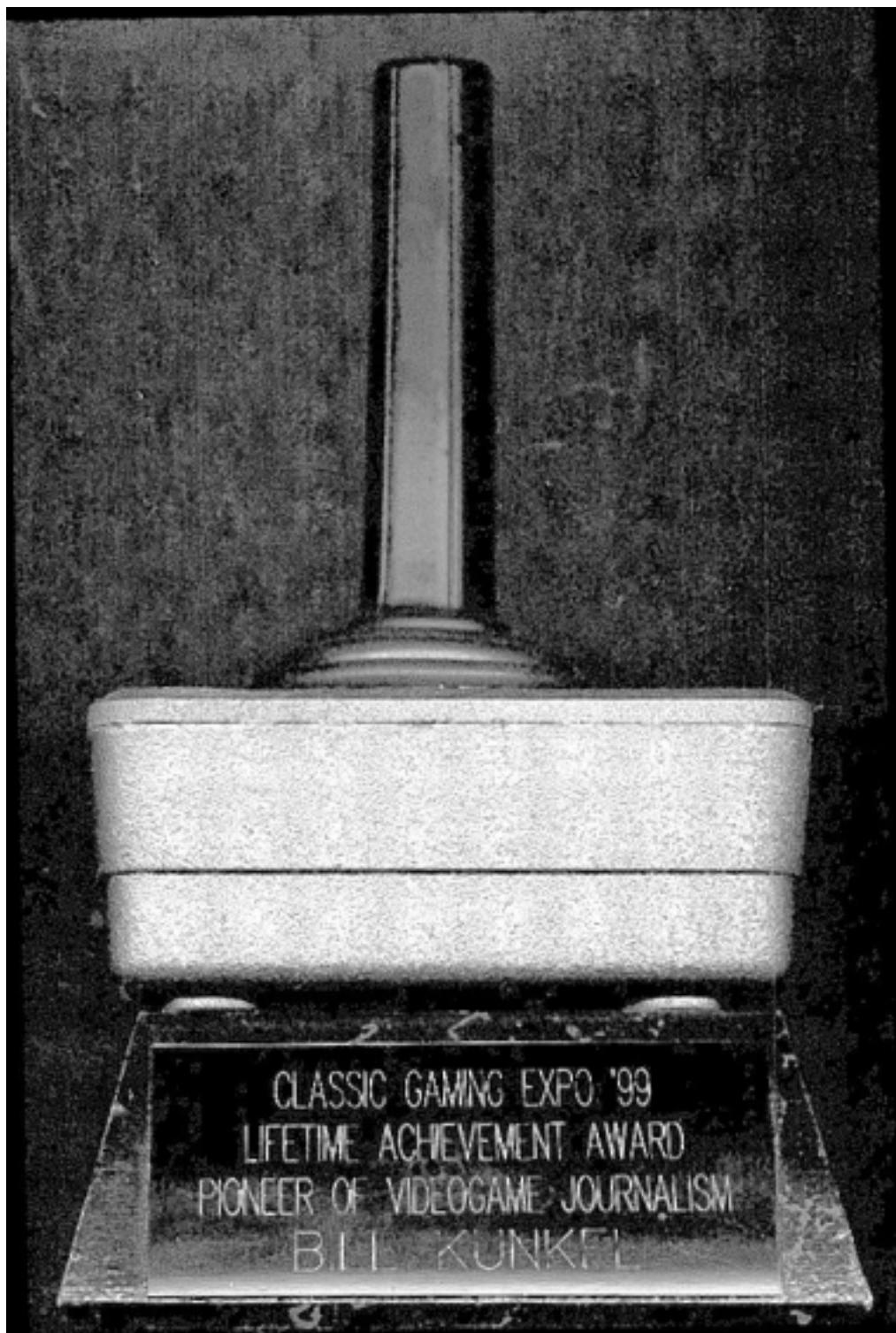
In the '90s, Richard fulfilled his destiny and built an actual castle in which he could create his lofty role-playing visions in a suitably lordly environment.

These days, I do my game-related work primarily with Running With Scissors, the creators of the *POSTAL* franchise. As a result, I've had the chance to spend many hours with their spokesman Gary Coleman. Gary's a nice guy, belying his rather bellicose reputation, and is a true, hardcore gamer. Also, at least in my experience, he is amazingly patient and friendly with fans.

Just don't ask him to say "Whatchu talkin' bout, Willis?" unless you're prepared to pay him.



*Among my current employers are UNLV and Running With Scissors, creators of the infamous POSTAL franchise. From the sublime to the ridiculous...*



*Among my proudest possessions, a gold joystick and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Classic Gaming Expo given to Arnie, Joyce and me at the '99 CGE. They gave us new, lucite ones in 2002, but I like this one better.*

## Totally Anecdotal

Some of my confessions are long and some of them are short. Some I like to see in their own chapter, while others I have for some reason grouped together in my mind as anecdotes. The result of those anecdotes appear in this chapter; a collection of stories that didn't seem at home in chapters of their own but felt just right in one another's company.

And so I give you the Doctor's favorite anecdotes...

### APPLES & PEANUTS

Despite its status as the world's leading producer of personal computers, IBM never really understood the home market. Of course, neither did Apple, a company which was theoretically aimed at the home user. Nonetheless, Apple absolutely refused to cooperate with us in any way, shape or form.

The big computer companies didn't see where they had anything to gain by supporting game magazines. After all, they genuinely believed, nobody buys a computer to play games. During the early days of *Electronic Games*, when an Apple II with a complete rig (including a Mockingboard which, when attached to a speaker, generated really lame sound effects on all those games that nobody was supposed to be playing) could cost close to \$3,000, we tried to get them to send us a machine for game testing.

"But Apple doesn't make games," the woman in charge of saying "no" explained to me as one might speak to a simpleton or a small child.

"We're aware of that," I explained patiently. "But surely you're aware of the fact that a lot of Apple owners use their machines to play games?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," she responded with a cynical chuckle. The implication was clear: I was trying to scam them out of an expensive computer and she was hip to me; except for the fact that she couldn't have possibly had less of a clue.

"Just take a look at all the game software sales for your machine," I reasoned. "Companies like Datamost and Sirius have lots of games available for the Apple II—it's part of the reason a lot of users buy computers."

"Apple doesn't make games," she repeated, indicating that this was the part of the conversation where I came in and all sticking around was going to accomplish was more rejection. So, Arnie reached into his own pocket and bought the Apple II upon which we reviewed all our Apple game software for at least the first year or so of the magazine's life. Arnie later purchased a IIc and we also acquired a IIe before moving on to the Mac, but

Apple never so much as tossed us a bone, which is at least a part of the reason why I and just about everybody else I know uses a PC today.

Seriously, from the first moment I touched a Macintosh, I thought it would be the Volkswagen of the home computer world. Unfortunately, Apple was thinking more along the lines of the Ferrari, at least price-wise. I maintain to this day that if the Mac had been sold at a reasonable price point from the launch, with SRPs gradually dropping (while the tech improved) in the ensuing years, it would be the most popular computer in the world today.

The only people who didn't like Macs were hackers, that 30% of the existing market that wasn't happy unless it could get inside the programs and fiddle with them. On the other hand, 70% of the users—and that percentage would rise along with computer sales to the mainstream audience—wanted computers to be like TVs, VCRs and CD players. You put in the software, you press a button and it runs. You no more think about the technological processes than you consider the mechanics of turning on a light switch. Plug & Play they call it and the Macintosh was the mostintuitive computer in the world, with many of its innovations, such as the use of file folders and the desktop, destined to become the future paradigm for all computers. Of course, many of those ideas were seemingly the result of a visit that the Apple-cheeked Steves paid to the geniuses at the Xerox PARC brain trust, but whatever the case, Apple, for all its vision, never comprehended the significance of entertainment on its home computers.

IBM at least had the sense to contact *Electronic Games* and arrange to send us its first home machine, the vaunted PCjr, also known as The Peanut (IBM went so far as to license the use of Charles Schulz's famous characters to help pitch the system). Since Arnie had his Apple II, it was decided that I'd get the PCjr and would review its games.

The day the system arrived I realized immediately that IBM had no idea in this world how to sell to non-business consumers. I was living in a duplex in Queens and had a good sized living room, but the box the system came in was more than large enough to hold a refrigerator-freezer! The thing was so intimidating that all the enthusiasm I had felt to play games on this new system sort of drained out through my feet.

The box sat, unopened, in the middle of the living room for about four days before I gathered up the courage and the momentum needed to open the damned thing. Inside were things guaranteed to freeze the soul of your normal, computer illiterate, consumer. Massive, phone book-sized binders containing floppy disks and a *War and Peace*-sized volume dedicated to teaching the user a variety of computer languages, from BASIC to LOGO, filled the gigantic cardboard box nearly to the top.

I unpacked the binders one at a time until I finally reached the actual computer itself. And by the way, the size of the monitor had nothing to do

with Peanut's humongous casing since the PCjr didn't come with a monitor. It was, in fact, designed to work off your TV set, thereby making it highly unlikely that the user would wind up on the living room floor running the kind of spreadsheet and database programs that ran on the big, expensive IBM PCs and often cost more than the entire Peanut package.

You see, IBM was a very conflicted company. The people behind the Peanut wanted it to fly, but the company itself as well as the PC guys (in those days the term "PC" referred to the big IBM office personal computers; home computers were designated "microcomputers") weren't so sure. If the PCjr was too good, smaller businesses might opt to buy it instead of the full PC at a fraction of the cost.

Sabotage was clearly in order.

Long story short, you had a classic House Divided Against Itself scenario. Instead of the classic IBM PC keyboard, for example, the PCjr came with an undersized "chiclet" style keyboard. The weirdly spaced rubber alpha-numeric keys guaranteed that no trained typist would be able to work on the machine.

In the keyboard's defense, however, the nub-like keys glowed in the dark. Now is that one hell of a feature or what? I mean, if you're Bruce Wayne and you're using the thing in the Batcave well, that would probably be a Good Thing, especially since the Peanut's keyboard configuration would make touch typing a challenge even for the Dark Knight.

On its own, this horrific keyboard would have doomed the Peanut, but the system's enemies at Big Blue had lots of contingency plans, such as the "trim control" style joysticks. These overly-complicated things were hardly be recognizable to coin-op players as joysticks. Instead of the simple, self-centering, single button joystick pioneered by Atari for use on the both the VCS and its computers (the C64, quite sensibly on Commodore's part, was also designed to use this kind of joystick), IBM opted for the same type of joystick that already haunted the Apple II game programs.

These joysticks allowed the user to "fine tune" their control using a pair of roller switches to set the X and Y axis. You could also toggle from self-centering to "dead fish flop" mode. The problem was that very few gamers wanted to be bothered with these high maintenance controllers and opted, by and large, to use keyboard-based controls.

Then there was that business about the use of Charlie Brown and company. After hyping the confluence of Charles Schulz and its new home computer, the new IBM home system was rarely, if ever, referred to as The Peanut—it was always the PCjr (just in case you might get the deluded idea that it was as good as the PCsenior). And I cannot recall seeing a single Peanuts character anywhere in the documentation, packaging or in the software itself.

But it was far from a total loss. Sierra Online, in particular, broke new ground with games such as *King's Quest*, the first adventure game in which the characters could be moved around the screen, arcade-style.

There were simply too many intrigues and too many enemies in the court of IBM for the helpless, friendless PCjr system to survive into adulthood; the poor Peanut turned out to be the Charlie Brown of home computers. No doubt the system would have been far better off if its parent company had simply donated it to a gaming orphanage, or left it on Atari's steps and let another company raise it.

### THE SUN-BURNT STAR OF RADIO & TV

One of the unexpected results of *Electronic Games*' success was my sudden emergence as a frequent radio and TV guest. I was especially popular on the regional morning shows which were becoming all the rage in the early-'80s. *AM Peoria*; *Good Morning, New York*; *Wake Up, Charleston* and dozens of similar shows bid for my presence come holiday season so I could explain to parents the various strengths and weaknesses of the existing videogame systems.

I once did three consecutive days on *Good Morning, New York* (I still have their coffee mug here somewhere...); the day before Thanksgiving, Thanksgiving itself and the day after Thanksgiving, with each day devoted to a different system (Atari VCS, Mattel Intellivision and ColecoVision). On Thanksgiving, since I wasn't traveling from the office, ABC sent a stretch limo to my home and drove me back in same.

If I did a show in New York, I would invariably be recognized by somebody on my way back to the office. But one night, on my way from the office to the subway station, I was filmed without knowing it. That night, I turned up as one of the people walking the streets of New York about whom David Letterman would make some kind of snarky comment.

So there I was, snug in my bed watching the old Letterman show with my girlfriend. Suddenly, she screams. Brief, but loud. "That's you!" she insists, shaking me. And sure enough it was, wearing my black felt fedora, my black leather coat and carrying my black leather briefcase. In sunglasses.

At twilight.

"Now there's a man on his way to make a drug deal!" Dave announced gleefully to the delight of the crowd. The next day, everybody in the office was all over me. I'd been on television dozens of times and the most I'd ever heard was "You looked good," from Jay Rosenfield on my way back after doing my first TV show.

Now that David Letterman had condemned and maligned me (I had made a drug deal the previous evening), however, they all seemed to think I was something of a star.

But the TV appearance I will never forget was the one I did in Denver on a beautiful spring day. I was to appear on the *Joey Reynolds Show*, a program that was unique to me in that the first hour was done on the radio. After the hour was up, we would move over to the TV studio across the room and do an hour TV show.

In any case, I arrived early in the afternoon and the show wasn't scheduled until late that night, so I had an entire day to kill. I rolled a couple of joints, strolled out of the hotel, and just started walking. Pretty soon, I spotted a large patch of greenery; it had to be a park.

Indeed it was, and quite an attractive park at that. I settled down beneath a tree, smoked a bit, and started reading. Although it was still only spring, the day seemed quite warm and, as I was living in New York at the time, there were precious few opportunities to catch some rays. So I took off my shirt, laid back down, and promptly fell asleep.

When I woke up, about two hours later, I knew instantly that I was in trouble. I wasn't sunburned, I was incinerated. I had forgotten that a Mile High City is going to poke right through the ozone layer, allowing the sun to strip the skin directly from your body.

Without thinking, I threw on my shirt. The pain quickly reminded me that sudden, sharp movements would punish me with withering pain. Somehow, I stumbled to my feet and found my way back to the hotel, glowing like Chernobyl at the height of its meltdown.

When I finally got back to my room, I looked at the pants, shirt and sports jacket I had brought to wear on the show, but I didn't believe that clothing would ever touch my flesh again. I was prepared to take the plane home wrapped in a sheet, like Gandhi.

I still had about six hours before I'd have to get dressed and call a cab, so I swallowed a couple of aspirin, stripped slowly, and tucked myself gently between the cool sheets. Next, I turned up the air conditioning, keeping the room about the same temperature as Linda Blair's in *The Exorcist*.

The aspirin mellowed out the pain, but heat was rolling off my body in waves; I could have personally warmed the entire hotel swimming pool merely by standing in it. Nonetheless, I got to sleep.

The call from the desk awakened me around 6P.M., by which time I had moved along to the stage of sunburn where it seems as if every inch of your skin has been tightened to the point where it feels like simply lifting an arm might cause the skin to separate itself from your shoulder and drop to the floor. You think boards are stiff? They could have surfed on me in the condition I was in.

Now I began to contemplate the joy that awaited me in getting dressed. I had been uncomfortable enough all afternoon with only sheets making contact with my body and now I was expected to wear clothes?

It didn't seem as if it was going to happen. But it did. Gulping a couple more aspirins I was soon able to get into my pants, but it was the shirt and jacket that scared hell out of me for they would involve extensive arm contortions of the type likely to leave me limbless. But I did it. E-v-e-r s-o s-l-o-w-l-y I was able to clothe myself. Proud, with tears of pain rolling down my cheeks, I stepped into the hotel hallway and started off for my first combined radio-TV interview.

Alas, the step into the hallways furnished me with a problem I had forgotten about completely—I was barefoot. Screw the socks, I thought, and stepped into a pair of suede cowboy boots before completing my mission on pure, unadulterated guts.

And lots and lots of aspirin.

### TRAVELS WITH THE DOC

Of course, doing all these TV shows (the radio shows could almost always be handled by phone and Arnie and I would often do two or three a day while in the office) required a lot of travel. Among those trips that will live with me forever was a jaunt I took up to Redmond, Washington, home of, among others, Microsoft and Nintendo. So I accepted the TV shot, and then made preparations for editorial meetings with both companies while I was in town.

This was in the early-'90s and Joyce was in charge of contacting the travel agent and booking our flights. Since we had all just received a new set of American Express business cards, Joyce suggested using the local travel agent that dealt through AMEX. Sounded fine to me, so I called them and spoke to this guy named Mickey and told him I was going to Redmond, Washington and I believed that meant I'd be flying into Seattle.

Mickey fell silent, but I could barely hear the gentle tapping of a computer keyboard in the background.

"You're going to Redmond?" Mickey asked.

"Right, but the nearest airport is in Seattle."

A pause. "Well how about this, then?" Mickey responded in a tone that suggested he was about to do the travel agent version of pulling a rabbit out of his hat. "How about I send you to Redmond, direct?"

"Redmond has an airport?" I asked, confused. I'd been to Redmond before and always by way of Seattle.

"Sure do. Wouldn't you rather fly into Redmond direct?"

Hell, he was the travel agent. "Sure," I told him.

The first stage of the trip took me to some other city—Portland, I think—at which point I boarded one of those 16-seaters for the last leg of the trip. Those little planes can be pretty lively, especially if you encounter any serious weather, but I possess a secret power in that I fall asleep almost

instantly when traveling in moving vehicles. I believe the technical term is Motion Narcolepsy, but while it makes me perhaps the dullest traveling companion this side of a corpse (and a very bad candidate for a driver's license), it makes flying a lot easier on me.

Except for the part where we start to descend, my ears pop and I'm suddenly awake and feeling like death warmed over. There was a sweet little old lady sitting next to me. "Oh," she said, noticing that I was actually sentient. "You almost missed the landing."

We began to make small talk as I attempted to twist my body back into a semblance of normal human anatomy after an hour of having my legs jammed up against the seat in front of me.

"So, where will you be staying in Redmond?" she asked.

"The Hilton," I told her, and a strange look crossed her otherwise pleasant face.

"I don't think we have one of those, honey," she responded. "Though there is a Comfort Inn, I believe."

Still slightly disoriented, I checked my reservation information. "Nope. Redmond Hilton," I read, passing the reservations over to her. She put on her reading glasses and a look of genuine alarm filled her eyes.

"This is the Redmond Hilton," she said, as if that was some revelation or something. "In Redmond."

"Well? Isn't that where we're landing?"

"I'm sorry, hon, but we're landing in Redmond Bend. That's in Oregon."

I closed my eyes tightly and I'm sure my lip quivered. "Is that far from Redmond, Washington?" I asked with no little desperation.

"It is in another state," she pointed out.

I started thinking about how many years I could get if I took a couple of swings with my favorite Louisville Slugger at Mickey the travel agent's head. But the rage passed and I attempted to move directly to acceptance. We'd land, I'd make a reservation for the next flight to Seattle and I'd still make it in time for the next morning's appointment.

Then we landed. Just in time to find the airport being closed. Now I didn't even know that they closed airports, but I was assured no plane was coming or going before 5A.M. the following morning and they were locking the doors, so I guess they do close them in some places. In a daze, I stumbled outside and boarded what, for all I know, was the only taxi cab in Redmond Bend, Oregon.

Now no offense intended toward the people of Oregon, which I'm sure has a very nice Trail and is a wonderful place to live and raise children, but I'm sorry, Redmond Bend is a hole. As I boarded the taxi, I got the usual "Where to?"

"I hear you have a Comfort Inn here."

“That we do.”

“You think they have a room available?”

“Pal, I’d bet my life on it,” he promised as his hand came down to start the meter ticking.

By the time I checked in, it was around 10P.M. and I asked the guy at the desk where I could get a bite to eat. He looked at his watch and shook his head sadly. “Sorry,” he informed me, “the restaurant just closed.”

I presumed he meant the motel’s restaurant. But no, he meant THE restaurant. So I dumped my bags and headed out into the Redmond Bend night, walking about a mile before I located a convenience store just about to close. I dined royally on crackers and a Yoo-Hoo chocolate drink and caught a few hours sleep before getting up, still dressed, and checking out.

When I arrived at the airport it was around 4:30A.M.—I always get to airports early—and, yup, it was still closed. Around 4:55A.M., a little old man arrived and opened the place up (for all I know, the key had been under the welcome mat the whole time). Needless to say, there was nobody inside and they hadn’t even updated the Arrivals and Departures on the monitor (that’s right, it’s singular).

Thankfully, groups of employees and even a few travelers soon began to straggle in and, by 6A.M., I was on a plane about to take me to Seattle, from which point I would travel by taxi to my destination if it cost me \$300.

So if ever the need comes upon you to travel to Redmond, Washington, allow me to paraphrase the words from that old blues classic, *House of the Rising Sun*: “Mothers, tell your children not to do what I have done. They’ll spend their life in pain and misery in a town in Oregon.”

### THE POKEMON LAUNCH

At the E<sup>3</sup> where Nintendo rolled out its already-hot Pokémon franchise, they did it with a bang.

Literally.

They had this massive, see-through bin positioned in one corner of what came to be known over the years as Nintendo City. Like a feudal lord, Nintendo gobbled up a massive chunk of real estate for its exhibit space and then sublet smaller booth spaces within to its third-party publishers. The entire space was generally surrounded by faux-castle walls, reinforcing the sense that this was Nintendo Territory.

Anyway, the massive Plexiglas storage tank was filled to the gills with tiny, plush Pokémon characters. And since this was the Pokémon game “launch,” the idea was that every hour or so, the storage bin would fire one of the stuffed Pokémon dolls into the air. When it landed, a happy conventioneer would find it and take home a cute souvenir.

However, having seen the lengths that industry people would go to in

order to obtain an ugly button bearing the words Three Dirty Dwarves, I just had a bad feeling about the idea of throwing this stuff—which was actually quite collectible and of obvious monetary value—into the air.

Surprisingly, the first few rounds went okay. People weren't expecting it and it was a neat surprise when one of the cute little toys suddenly landed at your feet.

By the third day, however, Nintendo had to stop the entire promotion because the attendees were literally brawling in the aisles over a Pikachu plush doll as if it were Barry Bonds' 71<sup>st</sup> home run ball.

By the end of the show, they had found some other means to distribute the toys and my estimation of the *Pokémon* toys' collectible value was proven out. One attendee had actually managed to amass a complete set, which he sold in front of my eyes, no haggling, for \$400.

Once, at a Chicago CES, they decided to charge admission and actually admit people who weren't in the industry on the show's last day. Of course, just about every booth immediately packed up and locked down everything that could be removed by hand for fear that the crazed gamers would go crazy at the sight of their giveaway key chains and press kits.

But when the multitudes finally burst through the doors, only Acclaim stood prepared to meet them. The people on site obviously decided they had enough of the small *Mortal Kombat* buttons to satisfy the throng.

Those poor, deluded fools.

Have you ever seen locusts strip a field? Witnessed groups of piranha peel the skin off a cow? That, my friend, was as nothing compared to what those "outsiders" did to that Acclaim booth. I mean, they took everything that was or wasn't nailed down and then they took the nails! It may be an urban legend, but I hear one of the booth girls is missing to this day.

And that was the last time non-industry personnel have been permitted access to a CES or E<sup>3</sup>. Once proved to be more than enough.

The preceding has been a cautionary tale brought to you by The Game Doctor.

#### TRON TO PLEASE

As anyone familiar with the original *Electronic Games* magazine can attest, we very rarely did covers based around one specific game. More often than not, they'd be "theme" covers. If we were doing a Player's Guide to Science Fiction Games, for example, we'd go with an all-purpose sci-fi cover. If mysteries were the subject of a feature article, we'd order a drawing or execute a photo shoot that suggested the elements of the classic mystery.

In fact, *Miner 2049er* was the first actual game to be a cover subject (not counting *Space Invaders* on the cover of the first issue since that

particular cover wasn't about *Space Invaders* in specific as much as it used that game to stand-in for all videogames).

But if I ask you what single product appeared on the cover of more *Electronic Games* than any other, would you guess *Pac-Man*, *Defender*, *Zaxxon*? Doesn't matter. Whatever game you name will be the wrong answer because the subject of the most *Electronic Games* covers was not a game at all, it was Walt Disney's *Tron*.

The movie that anthropomorphized computer programs was among the most eagerly awaited films of the year 1982, especially if you were a gamer. Somehow, we seemed to believe that this film would be a new *Fantasia*, something that would open people's minds about videogames, because the industry was already feeling heat about kids becoming "addicted" to playing video and computer games.

It has been my experience that there is a certain type of adult who grows alarmed, disturbed—damn it, downright annoyed—by the idea that great masses of people, especially young people, are having a wonderful time doing something. Whether it's reading comic books, dancing to rock and roll or spending hours a day playing *SOCOM*, it just makes them crazy for some reason.

As I write this, the sixth of what will eventually be seven Harry Potter books is about to hit the bookstores. All across the nation, kids are at bookstores, attending Potter Parties—even the producers of Tim Burton's new heavily-hyped kid's film, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are afraid that their take on its opening weekend will be significantly dented by children sitting home and reading a book.

Incredible, isn't it?

A blockbuster movie is shaking in its boots over the appearance of a mere book. Adults everywhere should be euphoric with joy that the wonder of reading has been born again among children who would otherwise have grown up with a positive dread of encountering literature.

And yet church groups shake their fists, threatening schools that attempt to exploit this newfound love of books with lawsuits and threats of eternal damnation.

Video and computer games may not have been literature, but wasn't interactive entertainment—entertainment that engaged young brains, made them work and held them in focus for hours at a time—better than enduring an endless stream of passive viewing, sitting back while the TV set did all the work?

Somehow, in our enthusiasm and naiveté, and carrying as it did the Disney imprimatur, we believed that *Tron* would be the vehicle that explained us to the rest of the world, the way *Easy Rider* attempted to present the '60s generation in a positive, albeit realistic, light.

Of course, the subsequent failure of *Tron* has become the stuff of Hollywood legend. It was poorly edited, written in a decidedly half-assed manner, and offered, primarily, its stunning computer graphics by way of compensation.

Arnie, Joyce and I saw it the first day of its release, and as we left the theater the mood was clearly one of disillusionment. The film hadn't delivered everything we'd hoped for, but then what movie could have? Ironically, today the film is viewed much more sympathetically. Just take a virtual cycle ride over to the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) and see fan after fan gush over the film's technical accuracy (well, they did understand how computers worked), its religious allusions (the film's villain aims to eliminate the belief among the programs that users actually exist), probably the film's strongest component and, even today, they rave about those incredible graphics.

It may well be that *Tron* will indeed be Disney's 21<sup>st</sup> Century *Fantasia*—a film that also flopped when it was initially released because it was simply ahead of its time.

At least then I wouldn't feel so bad about all those covers we wasted on it.

### FALLING GARGOYLES

When Reese Publishing purchased the penthouse floor of the Grumbacher Building and became Reese Communications in 1983, my understanding was that the Rosenfields were able to pay for the entire thing in cash, which I'm sure got them an excellent price (Grumbacher was and remains a leading manufacturer of paint products).

One of the conditions of the purchase, however, involved Reese picking up the tab for the long-overdue refurbishing of the intricate stonework which graced the very top of the edifice. It was an old New York building, 20 floors up as I recall, and the top had been trimmed with stone carvings—the usual lions and gargoyles—which had long ago become blackened by New York's relentless pollution and soot.

So, soon after we moved in, a work crew was hired to steam clean the old monsters that stood guard over the place. Mostly I remember thinking it was a pain in the ass. We couldn't go out on the balcony during the process because the workers insisted it was too dangerous. And, having almost been crushed by a similar piece of stonework while walking along Court Street in Brooklyn toward the Katz's apartment, I believed them.

So, the workmen became part of our lives, with mats, dust and other pulverized matter everywhere. Then, one bright, sunny day, I looked at my watch and saw it was almost one o'clock. So I strolled next door to see if Arnie felt like grabbing a bite to eat.

He did, and so we set off for the elevator and a walk down the block. But something curious happened. Just as our elevator door closed, we heard a loud sound, a crackling, crashing thud of a sound, followed by a series of female screams.

Arnie and I turned to look at one another, each of us wondering what the hell had just happened. But by then we were on the ground floor and the elevator door opened, so we simply moved on, making a note to find out what had happened when we got back.

Unfortunately, the note was not necessary. After a quick lunch, we headed back and as we turned the corner for the short walk to our front door, we saw police cars, fire engines, ambulances and emergency service vehicles stacked up along 34<sup>th</sup> Street like a convoy, with firemen running in and out of the lobby.

“What happened?” I asked somebody from our office who was standing outside with us.

“Accident,” he replied, obviously a master of the obvious.

Eventually we were allowed back up in our office, where we encountered hysterical, sobbing women and dazed, traumatized men stumbling around in shock. The air was so thick with dust and other tiny, floating particles that you could hardly see.

It seems that several of the workers had been cleaning a section of the stonework when several of the gargoyles and lions simply detached themselves from the wall and crashed to the patio, workers and all, directly outside my office window.

There was still dust everywhere as I stared in disbelief at the scene. The dead bodies had already been removed, but there was still plenty of red liquid evidence of the tragedy out on the patio. The office had now been baptized in blood.

By the following day, there remained not the slightest trace of a horrible accident having occurred on the penthouse level the previous afternoon. The story made the papers, of course, but that’s not page one material in New York.

Life simply went on and we went back to putting out the next issue of *Electronic Games*, but for the longest time, I couldn’t look out my window and see the same glorious view. The cost of the building now included several lives.

I don’t believe they ever replaced the gargoyles and I know nobody missed them.

#### GUN TALK

Once my life with KKWD ended [see the chapter “Breaking Up is Hard to Do”] and I began my days as co-founder of FOG Studios, everything

changed. We soon had as many employees as the old KKWD, but there were no slackers in this group. Ed Dille started up an office from his home in the American backwoods of West Virginia (where he actually lived in a "holler" or "hollow" for those of you who never watched *The Beverly Hillbillies*) and ran them like a Drill Sergeant at Boot Camp Central.

However, the changeover in employees shifted the balance of culture within the operation from a group comprised primarily of city folks to one filled with country boys. Ed and his boys would arrive at the airport looking like the James Gang in their dusters and cowboy hats. I myself have not worn a cowboy hat since I was seven years old, but I certainly don't bear any ill will toward those who do. Actually, they were a great bunch of guys, talented and hard workers. They just had this little quirk that worked my nerves pretty good.

It was their constant gun-obsessed conversations. These guys were hunters and each of them apparently possessed a collection of rifles, shotguns and pistols large enough to stage their own Waco or Ruby Ridge-style shootout.

I will admit that I have owned and even fired handguns, but this obsession with them just bored me sillier than I normally am. I don't drive, you see, so I don't much enjoy sitting around the pickle barrel, jawin' about hemi engines and the best way to remove a windshield, either. But compared to the endless gun chatter, conversing on the subject of classic cars began to seem like a delightful change of pace.

It finally came to a head, however, as a group of us made our way into a restaurant to catch a bite to eat and, \*sigh\*, talk about ballistics, hollow point bullets, fiberglass Derringers, and whatever the hell other nonsense came to their minds. As it happened, however, I was in one of my less pleasant moods and I guess I'd heard enough about guns on that particular day to think about using one on myself.

"Boy," I observed loudly, "you guys talk about anything but guns and hunting?"

They immediately sprang to the defense of their favorite subject, one after another describing their most treasured killing piece as if remembering a favorite lover.

"I don't know about that," I finally responded. "See, I come from New York."

One of the boys laughed. "Well hell, Bill, I know they got guns in New York City!"

Everybody laughed. Back in those days, if you came from New York City, it was not unusual to be asked questions like: "How many times have you been shot?"

"Sure we do," I agreed. "We got plenty of guns in New York."

*Bill Kunkel*

They looked at me, uncomprehending. So why didn't I love guns, they seemed to ask with their eyes wide.

"Only thing is, we just use 'em once then throw 'em away."

That did it. At least they didn't talk about guns anymore on THAT trip.

# Game Journalism: The Next Generation

(1995)

Initially, I hadn't planned to write about the current state of game journalism, but when Leonard Herman suggested the idea, I had to agree that it not only made sense, it was probably the perfect way to wrap up this collection of tattered memories, plated to please.

So I prepared myself to go out and pick up a copy of every game magazine I could find. I didn't expect much, but when I reached the local supermarket (they don't have newsstands in Las Vegas and, for all I know, they no longer exist anywhere in the United States) with the largest magazine selection, I was appalled to discover not so much as a single game magazine anywhere in the overflowing stacks of periodicals devoted to tattoos, choppers, PCs, sports and a seemingly endless variety of extremely softcore porn 'zines of the *Maxim* variety.

I was outraged and immediately made plans to visit a Barnes & Noble the following day, bookstores being the only alternative source of magazines in Las Vegas. It was on the walk home, however, that I began to think about what I was doing. At most, I'd be looking at a single issue of a group of magazines with which I am otherwise totally unfamiliar. Then I would judge them based on how well they hit my buttons. But would any of those magazines have really been produced to cater to my tastes?

I somehow doubt that *Electronic Gaming Monthly* still has many of its readers from as recently as a decade ago. Magazines written for teens generally turn over their readership every few years. The last mass circulation game magazine that I genuinely enjoyed-and the modern game publication I consider to be the only true successor to *Electronic Games*-was *Next Generation* (this evaluation excludes *Classic Gamer Magazine*, which was an overt tribute to *Electronic Games* that I obviously loved but can't fairly evaluate it in terms of the mass market since it didn't focus on the contemporary scene). *Next Gen* was written for thinking adults, covered the full spectrum of electronic games and took what we were doing and, for the most part, improved upon it.

The only bitch I had regarding *Next Gen* was its incredible short-sightedness. The magazine would regularly run those "100 Best Games of All Time" articles, which is fine (*Electronic Games* would have done a whole lot of "10 Best" articles if Arnie hadn't objected to them so strenuously, because I'm a total mark for that format). But when I'd scan the *Next Gen* lists, it was rare to find a game more than two or three years old. Oh sure,

the *Pac-Mans* and the *Space Invaders* were on hand, confined to a sidebar of "classic games" which read more like the literary equivalent of a nursing home. But the writers seemed to consider only "next generation" games to be truly worthy of critical evaluation, like cineastes who can't tolerate silent films.

But I loved *Next Gen*, and I mourned its passing. Since then, the only game magazine I have seen consistently is *Tips & Tricks*, which I receive through the kindness of my old friend, Chris Bieniek. And while I enjoy the columns, I could care less about the tips and the tricks.

Sorry as I am to say it, the bottom line is that game magazines are, in all probability, finished as a vital force in the video and computer game industry. I write this in full hopes of being proven wrong, but given the time-sensitive nature of information in the gaming universe, who can afford to await the arrival of some magazine when that data can be harvested almost instantly on one of the many excellent online game sites?

Hell's bells, we're living in a time where there are two cable channels devoted to full-spectrum game coverage. G4 TV has come a long way since its startup, but I can't help but wish that the British GamerTV channel was available in this country on a full-time basis as well (some of its content has appeared on Bravo and they have deals with Discovery Channel and Fox). They've done some really fascinating pieces, including an interview with Arnie, Joyce and I that may be the only TV piece the three of us have ever done together and Aaron Paul's *Around the World in 80 Games*, where you get to see, among other things, Aaron being shown the sights of Las Vegas by Vince Desi and me.

If you want to see what a game looks and plays like, how can a magazine, no matter how colorful and bristling with screenshots it may be, compete with a TV show?

And if you want the latest in gaming gossip or want to hear what was said at yesterday's Microsoft press conference, you will certainly be able to find everything, up to and including a transcript of the event, at any of several locations online.

The only thing that magazines can still do better than TV or the Net is in-depth coverage and analysis. People don't like reading a 10-page article online; it just isn't comfortable. So online analysis tends to be as concise as possible and a magazine, if it were aimed at an adult audience, could offer a level of insight into gaming at large that neither TV nor the Internet could easily match.

Yet there seems to be very little interest in such a magazine and I can understand that, because adult gamers, especially console gamers, have been alienated by game magazines since the death of *Next Generation*. So you'd not only have to sell a publisher on the idea, you would have to

actively attempt to build awareness of the product among its demographic target groups.

In fact, why bother, when we can surf the Net or watch G4?

Maybe because at least some of us still like magazines. We're tactile and enjoy things we can hold in our hands, take on an airplane ride, or read in our beds. Of course, if laptops get much smaller and cheaper, it may eventually become de rigueur to make one available in each of your bathrooms for toilet time perusal.

But in the meantime, magazines offer one additional virtue over alternative media-permanence. It's a heck of a lot easier to find a particular article I wrote over 20 years ago for *Electronic Games* than it is to locate any of the many columns I wrote for the HappyPuppy.com site less than 10 years ago. Sites come and go, commonly disappearing with their entire archives one day, never leaving so much as a virtual footprint behind.

Magazines endure and if the subject pre-dates the arrival of Internet technology, the information begins to thin out pretty radically. I am not a historian, but the stories and anecdotes which appear in this book would be, in many cases, impossible to locate in any other source - and *Electronic Games* arrived on the cusp of the Web.

So there are the arguments, pro and con. Perhaps there is a place for adult, all-platform game magazines after all.

It's just a shame that nobody seems to be producing any.



*This was a gag shot they used in an article about me in the Las Vegas weekly City Life. I'm, like, totally wired — get it?*

# Contributors' Bios

## **BILL KUNKEL -- Author**

The co-creator of video and computer game journalism through the "Arcade Alley" columns in *Video* magazine (1978) and co-founder of *Electronic Games* (1981), the world's first magazine exclusively devoted to the subject, Kunkel has also consulted on games, served as an expert witness in several of the industry's seminal litigations and helped develop nearly two dozen games himself. He's written comics for DC, Marvel and Harvey; worked in a rock band for 10 years and has written articles for publications as diverse as *Town & Country*, *Games Magazine* and *The New York Times*.

Kunkel has overseen the start-up of more than half dozen magazines and Internet sites, including *VideoGames & Computer Entertainment*, *Sega Visions*, *Gamefan Sports Network*, *PC Ace* and the 90s revival of *Electronic Games*. The author of numerous books on game strategy, he currently works with game developer Running With Scissors, teaches classes on game design at UNLV and writes novels under a pseudonym.

## **LAURIE YATES-KUNKEL -- Editor**

A graduate of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV) class of '89 where she majored in English and History, Laurie became a reviewer and contributing editor for the 1990s incarnation of *Electronic Games* magazine, specializing in educational and kideo games. She subsequently authored several books on game strategy, including *Buried in Time: The Official Strategy Guide* and co-authored *Inside Electronic Game Design* with Arnie Katz, conducting the interviews which formed the centerpiece of the book.

She subsequently became News Editor for the re-launch of the *HappyPuppy.com* site as part of the @ttitude Network. Her trade show coverage was incredible, covering the floor while turning in as many as 75 stories a day. Laurie is currently a freelance writer-editor who conducted the first edit on *Confessions of The Game Doctor* and serves as the teaching assistant for Bill Kunkel's courses on game design held as part of UNLV's Continuing Education courses.

## **MICHAEL THOMASSON -- Cover**

Michael Thomasson is one of the most widely respected videogame historians in the videogame field today. He currently teaches college level videogame history, design, and graphics courses and is the founder and president of the highly respected Good Deal Games videogame database. For television, Michael conducts research for MTV's videogame related program *Video MODS*, and recently contributed to the Inventor of Home Videogames' publication, *Videogames: In The Beginning* by Ralph H. Baer. Michael has written business plans for several videogame vendors and managed almost a dozen game-related retail stores spanning two decades. His historical columns have been distributed worldwide in newspapers and magazines. He has also contributed towards or published dozens of games for several consoles, such as the Sega CD, Colecovision, CD-i and Vectrex. Michael's classic gaming business also sponsors retro-gaming tradeshows and expos across the United States and Canada. Mr. Thomasson and his wife JoAnn reside in New York. His website is [www.gooddealgames.com](http://www.gooddealgames.com).



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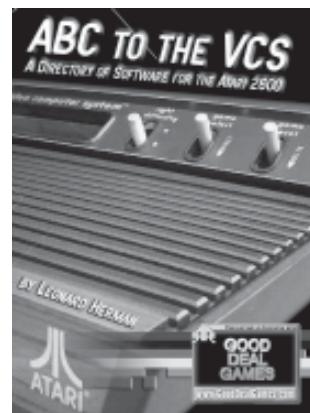


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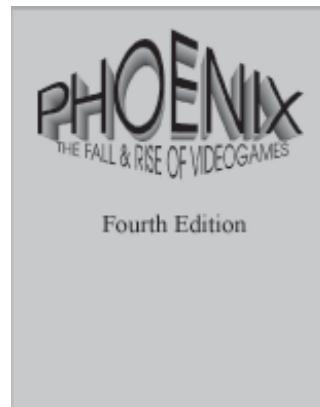
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